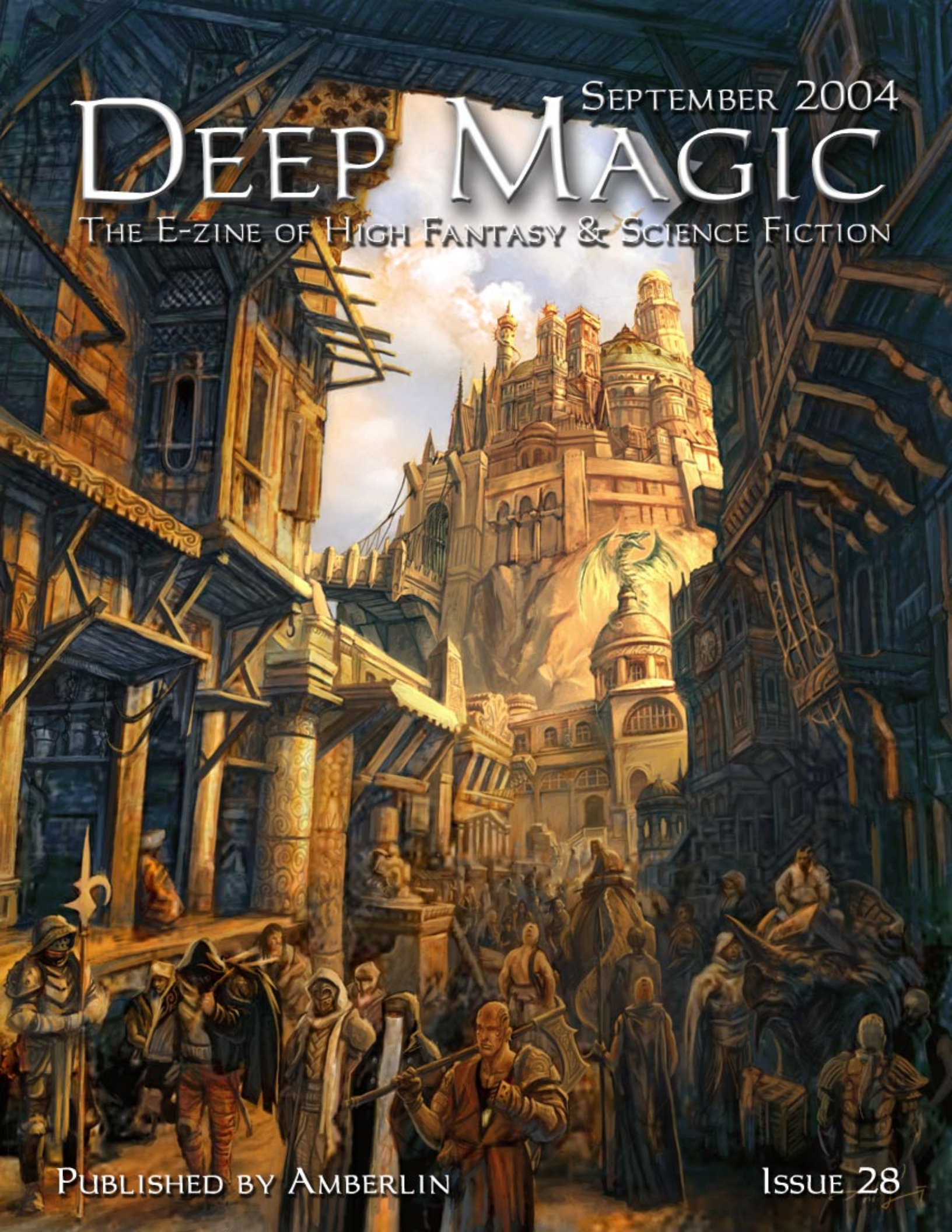
September 2004
Deep Magic
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"Prophecy - Yris"

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September 2004

Welcome to another issue of Deep Magic. Kids are going back to school, parents are breathing sighs of relief, but the well of imagination has not run dry yet. In this issue, we would like to introduce you to some new content and design. In the April 2004 issue, we launched the Kenatos world-building project. You seemed to enjoy it, and so this issue is dedicated to expanding it even further.

For starters, our resident web wizard Steven Richards has designed a new portal for the Kenatos project. It is an interactive website that brings together all of the information into one place. You can start wandering around here to read stories, explore maps, and delve into the broken history of the land.

Along with the web portal, we offer some new varieties this month. Scott Clements brings us *Graveyard of Wyrms*, a story exploring the mystery of dragons in Kenatos. Jeff Wheeler continues the story begun in April of Missy Grove and her brothers in *Silvandom*. He also provides some interesting background information on *The Ecology of Dryads*, unearthing a definitive discourse on the subject from a scholar in Kenatos. We hope you enjoy cover artist Aleksi Briclot's work *Prophecy-Yris* to tie in the theme.

We would also like to recognize our 2004 Lamp Post Award winners on page four. Congratulations to all the winners and those considered! It was a tight race this year.

We have other treats for you as well this month. Stephen Nelson brings us an interesting interpretation on how wizards lose their powers in *The Transference of Magic*. And if you enjoyed the adventure of Jalazar Flinteye in last April's issue, then sit back as the sci-fi mercenary returns in *Flinteye's Ride*.

In this issue you will also find articles by Ally Wrenn and Jeff Wheeler and a special interview with author Steven Erickson, author of the *Garden of the Moon*, part of the *Malazan Book of the Fallen*, a new series published by Tor. And last but not least, enjoy the artwork of Autumn Domoslai.

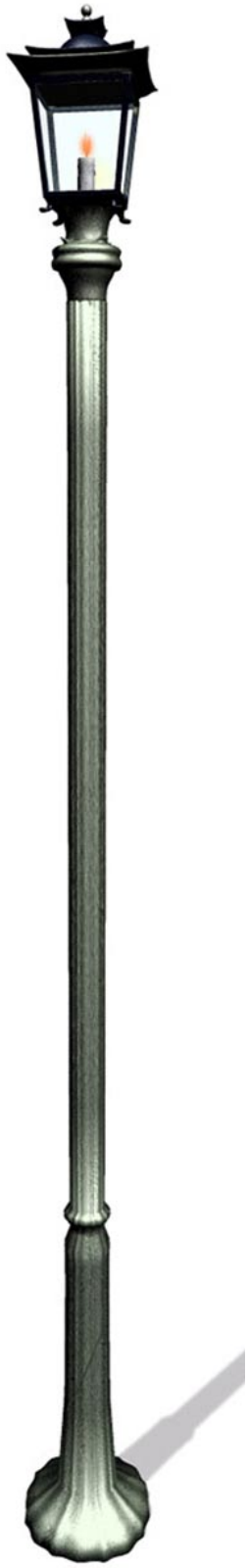
Enough dallying, get busy reading!

All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

The Lamp Post Award Winners

Deep Magic would be nothing without the authors and artists who volunteer their talents to the e-zine. Throughout the summer, we have allowed our readers to select the best short stories, artists, and articles from the second year of Deep Magic. We are proud to present the winners in this tight race. There were many excellent selections to choose from, but in the end, only one from each category could win. So without futher ado, we present the 2004 Lamp Post Award winners:



Best Fantasy Short

Into Pohjola
by Scott Clements
(October 2003)

Best Science Fiction Short

Cohesion Lost
by Darrell Newton
(March 2004)

Best Artist

Evening Duty
by Rob Katkowski
(October 2003)

Best Article

Notes On the Hero
by M. Thomas
(June 2003)

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication. ***Keep in mind that our writing challenge pieces are not edited and are usually written by amateur writers.*** Submission deadline is the 15th of the month.

We have recently changed how we accept writing challenge submissions. You can now go to our new online submissions system. Create an author profile and submit a writing challenge from there. We hope you like our new system.

September 2004 Writing Challenge

The world of Kenatos is the home for many races and professions. In previous challenges, you have added to the myths and complexities of the world. In this month's issue of Deep Magic, author Jeff Wheeler left a gaping hole in his story *Silvandom*. Missy Grove was attacked by a mysterious man, an "assassin" sent to spy on her. Only a few sparse clues were provided about this incident. The challenge this month is to develop more fully the dark side of the city. Appropriately timed for printing in October's special 'dark fantasy' issue, the challenge is to come up with your version of Kenatos' assassins and the ties that bind them, as well as a new name for them. Frighten us with your creativity, but keep it within our "safe places" standards. The best entry will be selected by our editors as the official "assassin class" for the Kenatos project.

Selections from the August 2004 Writing Challenge

Bioptic
Flight of Fancy
L'attente

The above stories were selected from the submissions we received this last month. As a refresher, here is the writing challenge from last month:

We're very proud of the covers we get, and we have the incredibly talented artists to thank. They allow us to use their images, which help to make Deep Magic what it is. It seems we're not the only ones, since challenges that create the most interest are those inspired by covers of Deep Magic issues. Therefore, we thought we'd try it again.

The challenge is simple: pick any 2004 cover (January through August) and write a story or scene inspired by that cover. There are no restrictions as to what you write, as long as it is fantasy or science fiction and you keep it clean. And, of course, under 1000 words. Good luck, and enjoy!

Bioptic

By A.M. Stickel
(Inspired by the July 2004 cover by Vincent Di Fate)

"What," asked my son, "became of the city of the First Ones?"

We stood together on the edge of the great rift in the land that had long ago filled with water to become a lake. Overhead the comforting sky enfolded our world as I did my son, its night radiance winking warmly with the songs of many suns.

"It does not matter. They of the city were our enemies, my child."

"Teacher says their kind once covered the land."

"Unlike us, Son, they were a disease, a malignancy. When the city was taken up, it was determined to be but one of the many sores afflicting the land. Radical measures were called for. Decontamination was required."

"So we take their place and heal the world's wounds, don't we, Mother?"

"Yes we do, and the Old Wise Ones still watch over us from above, even though we can no longer perceive their mighty High Fortress."

"I wish I could have felt the city going up. Teacher said that there came a great heat, and a wondrous rumbling, vibrating from low to high along the spectrum. It was a gentle rising, like floating in water, and not so fierce as to destroy the life units within."

"Their cells were sealed and preserved at first, and their codes read. They were found to be defective. The life units, once awakened, behaved erratically. Repair was attempted, but failed."

"I am sorry for them. I hope they did not suffer." I felt him tremble.

"You should not be. They received the termination they deserved. Rather, you should be sorry for this world, which, over the ages, is still not totally restored."

"The world is healing, Mother. I cannot help but wish the terminated life units could have been healed too, and made like unto us, so that they could know as we know and have joy."

"You are such a dreamer! Next you will be desirous of a visit with the Old Wise Ones themselves."

"If only I could go to them, and learn more about the First Ones!"

"You could not do so in your present form, my son. But we are taught that when our time upon the land is done, we will again be like the Old Wise Ones, and float above the world. Then we will perceive as they do. There will be no ending to our lives as we know now."

Sighs escaped my son's breathing bladders, and he placed his rippling tentacle trustingly in mine. I remembered him as a single cell, as a bud, as a blossom, and as a maturing presence among us. It was time for the next step. I lifted my tentacle to the scales covering his visual orifices, and scraped them away. For the first time he turned toward the gleaming vessel above with visual perceptors, our one heritage from the First Ones. He lay flat against the ground, transfixed by fear and wonder.

High Fortress hung within a starry web, forever closed to us. "Let us return to the cave, my son, and the others, for, although the sky is our friend, the sun of this world is our enemy. We must not let it corrupt us as it did the First Ones."

My son did as I asked, but spoke not to those younger, as I also asked. In the wake time, he left for the mating grounds and his new life among Those Who Wander Awhile.

Flight of Fancy

By Christina Schneider
(Inspired by the June 2004 cover by Sandrine Gestin)

Fancy stood beside her window, a leather-bound book lying open in her hands. She stared at the darkened horizon; her normally bright green eyes were veiled in thought.

Fancy was a slender young lady. She wore a fine green dress of velvet, embroidered with gold and lace. A delicate knot of twisted gold hung nearly invisible in the silken blond hair that draped her back.

Every day Fancy looked out her window wondering about the world outside, beyond her room. She had stayed locked in this high tower like a precious jewel all of her life. In this castle, there were no guards, no maids, and no royalty . There was only silence and her poor decrepit Grandma.

Fancy turned away from the window, closing her book and setting it down. The simple stone room was the only thing she had ever known. The four-post bed with red draperies, the oak table across from the fireplace, those things were all that filled her world. She had never known the beauty of trees, the smell of ocean, the soft crunch of grass, or the warmth of a touch.

Fancy had whittled away her days immersed in books. They were books of fairy tales and folklore; full of magical deeds, beautiful landscapes, and incredible journeys. Those books were Fancy's only window into the world. Traveling through words into the farthest reaches of her imagination, that was the only way to be free of this place. She looked down at the unread book in her hands. This book was the last, her final freedom.

There was a gentle knock on the door and a click of the lock. Her Grandma came tottering in carrying a tray of mud and twigs.

"Good morning, my dear. Did you sleep well?" she squeaked, hobbling over to the table.

"Yes, grandma," Fancy answered, assuming a happy face.

"The cook has made us a wonderful dinner, Fancy dear." Her grandma smiled, dishing the mud onto plates. "Won't you come and eat?"

"I'm not very hungry this evening, Grandma," said Fancy, smiling sadly.

Her grandma blanched. "Are you not feeling well, dear?! Should I get the healer?" She scurried over in a flurry of waving shawls and laid a gnarly hand on Fancy's forehead. "No fever. Open your mouth, dear."

"I'm fine, Grandma." She paused for a moment. "May I go outside?"

"Oh-no-no-no! You can never go out there! It is very bad out there!" her grandma cried, waving her arms about in a frenzy. "Only sickness and murderers and evil creatures who thirst for blood, out there! They kill at any chance! Your father and your mother went out there and never came back! You'll stay in here. Yes, yes, quite safe in here! My little dear cannot be risked! Too precious, you are!! They can't get you in here! Oh-no-no-no-no!" The old women hobbled to the doorway still ranting. She slammed the door behind her and locked it.

Fancy collapsed on the windowsill in despair. The answer never changed. "It is too dangerous! They can't get you in here! Too precious to be risked, you are!" Her grandma had stopped bringing her new books. She looked at the table struggling to hold back tears, and now there were mud cakes for dinner.

Leaning her head against the cold stone, Fancy stared hopelessly out the open window. A single runaway tear slipped down her face, unheeded.

Fancy stayed at the window all night, gazing sleepless and hungry into the measureless bespeckled heavens. Sometimes the sky felt close enough to touch or to gather up the clouds, or maybe even . . . . She shifted and felt her hand brush against something. Looking down, Fancy saw her last unread book lying open on the sill. She gazed upon its pages in despair.

* * *

Knock. Knock. Knock. Click!

Grandma waddled into the room carrying a breakfast tray of sand and leaves.

"Good morning, my dear. Did you sleep well?" she piped.

When there was no answer, she looked up. "Dear?"

The room was empty. There was only a single white dove fluttering out the open window. Resting against the windowsill was the last leather-bound book . . . Flight of Fancy . . . .

L'attente

By Amy R. Butler
(Inspired by the June 2004 cover by Sandrine Gestin)

"We are to be left alone."

The attendants scowled at her and whispered "la'captif" under their breath but grudgingly closed the door behind her. Leala crossed the sparse bedroom to where the elderly man lay on his bed, eyes closed and face parchment-like with dry wrinkles. Leala felt his neck and wrists, touched the lobes of his ears.

"You'll be fine, Master," she said, straightening, no look of pity on her face. "You will suffer no more than any other consumer of habrel."

Leala turned from him, moving to a small wooden door half-concealed by an ornate tapestry of the countryside of the fair realm. Leala brushed this aside to see the carvings on the door, the stars and moons, symbols and runes for life and death. She spun the handle and bumped the door open.

Leala slipped inside and closed the door quietly behind her, shutting off any desperate ray of light. Leala didn't need the light. She knew the intricacies of the room like a priest knows the minutiae of his inner sanctuary. She let her hands drift over the familiar furnishings of the room, worn and grainy tables, stoppers of potion bottles, the pyramids of scrolls and the towers of books. Finally her fingers found the damp, crumbling wooden cabinet, and she pried the door open. Master Grosvenor kept the entrants of his study so few he found locks and keys a bother, never dreaming he wouldn't be able to supervise the untrusted who were allowed into the room.

That's why Master Grosvenor will be spared, Leala thought to herself. She spent every day in his study, and there were times enough when a closed door separated them.

Leala's fingers crawled up the shelves. There. She grasped a tall bottle, smooth porcelain that had been crafted into a spiral shape. Wax secured the stopper. Leala pulled the bottle from the cabinet. There was no way she would be allowed to leave Master Grosvenor's chambers with the bottle; she had to open it now.

Leala felt for the corner of a table and with one strong swing, the bottle shattered against the edge, shards of porcelain scratching her arms and face. Leala blinked, dust in her eyes, as a soft golden glow grew in front of her. Leala fell to her knees, her eyes down-turned before she could fully see the image in front of her.

The voice that spoke was like a song, all words joined in a sweet melody that slid up and down the notes of the octave.

"At last, d'Alay rescues its patron."

Leala gasped, her breath rattling. In this presence she could barely hammer broken words together to reply. "Le'Rancer, d'Alay is not as it should be."

The patron was silent, considering this. "Elaborate."

"So much time has passed," Leala whispered. She could see the outline of her hands in the gentle glow. "The enemies of d'Alay have taken her as a slave."

"My people, taken captive as I was?"

"Yes, patron."

Again the patron was silent. Leala held her breath.

"D'Alay must be restored," the patron finally sang. "I shall make it right. And you, Leala d'Rancer, shall have a place of honor for freeing me."

With no more explanation, the light was gone. Leala exhaled, slumping against the floor. Broken pieces of the patron's prison scrapped against her body.

Leala pushed herself off the floor and groped blindly for the door handle. When her fingers finally fumbled around it, she thrust herself through the door, glancing only long enough at Master Grosvenor to ensure that he was still unconscious but alive.

She nodded to the attendants outside Master Grosvenor's door, not bothering to pay them information about his condition. She walked towards her room without thinking, her senses overly alert for changes in the environment around her. Servants passed by, attendants jeered when they saw her, and everything was as it always was. She reached her plain wooden door without fanfare or disaster.

Leala quietly shut the door to her room. She picked up *The Master's Almanac to Ancient Civilizations* and flipped through the pages on her way to the window. Glancing up as she continued to turn the pages, she peered outside into the courtyard.

All was quiet.

The door opened with an abrupt creak. Gregoir never bothered to knock.

"La'captif," Gregoir said sharply.

There will come a day when I will dissolve the tongues that curl around that vile word, Leala thought.

"Yes, swine?"

"His Majesty orders you to attend him while Master Grosvenor is ill," Gregoir sniffed, illustrating how he believed such royal positions above her.

"Fine, Gregoir." Leala looked up at the sky, the deepest blue. "I will gather my instruments and appear on order."

"Immediately," Gregoir said, slamming the door open his exit.

Leala waited. She could not keep her eyes on the courtyard nor the book with its illustrations of the ancient d'Alayi, people with pale skin and hair, people that glowed with power. The glow, the glow. Leala would be sure her attempt to reestablish the empire of the d'Alayi was successful when people would not be able to look at her without being blinded, no sooner.

Were those screams she heard? Shouts down the corridors? Or were they just echoes in her mind?

Leala stood as a statue, waiting, waiting for Gregoir to come berate her again, waiting for night to fall without interruption, waiting for the ancient glow.

The Graveyard of Wyrms

By Scott Clements

The Glittering Hoard huddled alone, just off the Havenrook Road that led, as all roads do, to Kenatos. Set against the magnificent backdrop of jagged peaks and valleys that formed the mountainous land of Alkire, the Hoard was not quite a 'Cesspool'. To those who kept track of such things, it rated just slightly above a 'Cesspool', but just below a 'Hole in the Wall'. That said, it fell into the neighborhood of a 'Dive', or perhaps, to those less forgiving, a 'Stinkhole'. Whatever it was, one thing was certain: the Glittering Hoard no longer glittered, if it ever truly had.

It was also not a place where strangers were welcome. Those few who called the Hoard home liked very much to know the faces that passed through its crooked doors. Strangers brought trouble. Some more than others . . .

* * *

Ionas dan Ayre kicked open the door of the ramshackle tavern. For a moment, as he held the door from closing, his lithe, cloaked form stood outlined in the cracked and pitted frame. He scanned the silent interior of the pub with slitted eyes before he raised his nose in the air. Two quick sniffs and Ionas smiled.

It was also not a place where strangers were welcome. Those few who called the Hoard home liked very much to know the faces that passed through its crooked doors. Strangers brought trouble. Some more than others . . .

"Feces," he proclaimed triumphantly.

Behind him, a second man appeared. Andral Voss ducked under Ionas' arm. Ten years Ionas' senior, Andral's charcoal beard was cut short and showed just the faintest hints of gray. Though shorter than Ionas, Andral's shoulders were as broad as a gallows, and he exuded a menacing air of strength and solidity. After shoving past Ionas, Andral too, lifted his nose and sniffed.

"Bah!" he spat, disgusted. Then he reached into the pouch at his waist and flipped his taller friend a gold coin.

With the nimble quickness of an asp, Ionas snatched the tumbling coin from the air and laughed. "That makes three in a row," he said, laying his hand across Andral's shoulders. Behind them the door slowly closed. "You are slipping, my friend."

Andral slapped Ionas' hand away and growled, "I think, rather, you are becoming a little too acquainted with these . . . places."

"That, my old friend, may be entirely true."

As they made their way through the gloomy quiet of the tavern, Ionas ignored the half-dozen pairs of eyes that followed their every move. When they reached the bar, he slapped the gold piece down loudly. "Drinks are on my friend!" he cried. "Barkeep, don't be shy, and keep them coming!"

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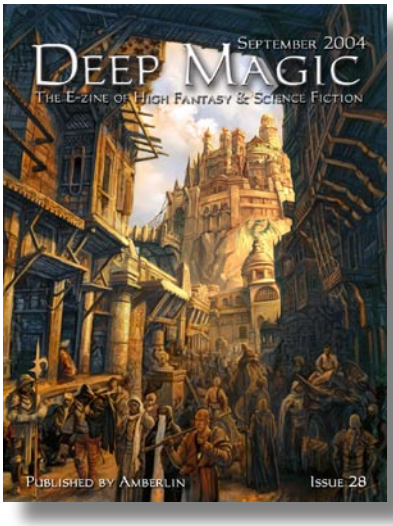
Featured Artist
Aleksi Briclot



Name: Aleksi Briclot
Age: 26
Residence: Paris - France
Marital Status: A girlfriend
Children: none
Professional and Educational Information: I've got something like a General Certificate of Education in applied art (to industry). Then I've studied graphism, graphic design, ads, typography 2 years in the same school. I began professionally (videogame and illustration) when I was 21.
Started Painting In: Ouchh !! I can't remember exactly!
Artist Most Inspired By: There are really too many!! I can't say I have only few influences. I'm impressed and influenced by a lot of artists in really different fields : fantastic illustrators , photographs, graphic designer (Witkin, Floria Sigismondi, Gottfried Helnwein, the Fuchs, Dirk Rudolph, Oliver Vaughan, Stefan Sagmeister, Brent Ashe...), comic-book artists (Adam Hugues, Travis Charest, Terrada, Jae lee, Tomm Cocker, Alex Maleev, Bryan Hitch, Ashley Wood, Benoît Springer, Naoki Urasawa...). Two artists are for me maybe above all of them: Dave MacKean and Phil Hale, 2 geniuses. There are a lot of really wonderful artists: Jon Foster, Kevin Llewellyn, Nirasawa, James Jean, Nicolas "Sparth" Bouvier, Bengal, and some that I personally know and am really proud to share: Benjamin Carré, Jean-Sébastien Rossbach,... There are too many to name all of them!! And I forget the movies directors…I could fill a whole page with names…

Media You Work In: I'm working in the videogame industry as a concept artist and art director, currently developing a big horror-action title for Darkworks company. I am also an illustrator (Magic cards, books, RPG books, magazines...) and a comic book artist (Spawn: Simony, Punish Yourself, Count of the round

continued on next page

table...)
Educational/Training Background: I've got something like a General Certificate of Education in applied art (to industry). Also I've studied 2 years art in the same school but it was all about graphism, graphic design, ads, typography and nothing about figurative drawing or painting...even less about fantastic illustrations... But I've discovered and I've learn so many things that became later true forces in my work. A priceless stage. I've developped my drawing and painting skills and abilities for my part and then in the professional field.
Schools Attended: Lycée de la communication Alain Colas, Nevers, France.
Other Training: looking at everything, trying, practising...I've done a lot myself and now I continue to learn with some professionals I'm working with.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: I've worked in the videogame industry for 5 years, for Cryo interactive, Kalisto entertainment, Duran (Duboi) and now Darkworks. I've done hundreds of B&W illustrations and cover illustrations for Roleplaying game books and magazines. For some RPG games like COPS, Prophecy, Cendres, the Metabarons, PostMortem, Nephilim… I am currently doing illustrations for Wizard of the Coast for Magic Cards. I've done some other illustrations and covers for other kinds of books and magazines. I'm also working in the comic field on Spawn for Todd McFarlane Productions. My first tradepaperback is called Spawn : Simony and I'm actually finishing other comic-book projects.
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: In any cases through my website : http://www.aneyeoni.com. I'll make a webshop soon.
Website URL: http://www.aneyeoni.com

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I don't know exactly. It's hard to remember and to give some specific circumstances. Maybe there was always something inside, that grew, grew and then became too big for me to be able to do something else. It was a strong impulse.

When I was young, I was very good at school but I was spending all my spare time drawing, painting, sculpting...doing something creative. I was in love with fantastic imagery and I would become at first a special make-up artist for the movie industry. I first discovered US comic-books like X-men and it was for me a revelation, something that made me draw. Later, I remember being stunned by one cover of « Slaine » by Bisley (He doodled the hair of the main character with a simple blue pen on his painting !!!) and then trying to do something like that with my acrylic paintings.

continued on next page

I also met a professional fantastic illustrator when I was 14. He offered to let me come to his house and learn with him. It was fantastic and it encouraged me to think of making my life through art.

I then chose an art school, learned a lot of different things. It really opened my mind. I practised my drawing and painting abilities on my own and then after my studies, I got my first job in a videogame company. It was the beginning of the journey…

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: Maybe the basis of my work could be presented as fantastic illustrations with a strong taste for dark things. But it's restrictive because my works for videogames, books covers and comics-books are really different (you can't focus on the same points in each field, for example illustration = synthesis and comic-book = development…) and for each project (even in the illustration field) I try to choose the best rendering or feeling, I change my technique so I'm not a only-one-style artist.

I also love to use mixed media, photographs, graphic design and typography… It depends on the subject.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: Everywhere (?). I don't know exactly. Maybe on strong pictures I see, on the web, in movies, in magazines, in publicity, in comic-books, in videogames, in art exhibitions, photographs and articles I read…When I see something interesting, I record it in my mind and I think my inspiration comes from all of this mixed with my own sensibility, my state of mind when I create a new piece.

Music had also certainly a wide part in the creative process.

When I create I need energy and I try to use every stimulating thing or input. I really love working with some other artists to talk with and share. Brainstorming is maybe one of the most exciting parts of the process.

Q: What inspired this piece (the cover) ? (Tell us its story...)
A: This piece was commissioned for the cover illustration of a Role playing game book called PROPHECY published by Asmodée / Darwin project. I've done all the previous covers for this universe and created a wide part of the visuals. This game takes place in a medieval fantastic world with dragons that all have an influence on every human's destiny.

This one was for the additional book called YRIS. This is the name of a big human city. They gave me a rough map of the city, I choose a point of view with the editor and then I tried to paint the most fantastic vision with some references they gave to me for the look of the city (old paintings).

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: I've got a really wide range of influences, in illustrations, comic-books, movies, photography and graphic design. I almost love each of this different artistic fields for different reasons. Too many artists to name them!!!

And because of my will to use different techniques for different projects, trying to choose the best one to express the best feeling, I'm always looking for new influences.

continued on next page

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: Being able to earn my living by doing what I like most. And having fun doing it.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: I don't know. There are too many exciting approaches in this genre (that's what makes it so interesting). It could be old-school, retrofuturist, steampunk, realistic, hard-science, fantastic, horrific, parodical and no one could be really old-fashioned or more hype than the others when it is made intelligently.

The Death of Reading

By Jeff Wheeler

I studied Latin at San Jose State University under the stark tutelage of Professor Marianna Olcott, otherwise and affectionately known to the students as "The Evil Bunny." Latin is an interesting language. For one, it's a dead language, but that is not what makes it interesting. The study of Latin is probably as complex and difficult as studying physics or calculus. At least it was for me. It is so chock-full of declensions, verbs, verb agreements, tenses (like the subjunctive and others too frightening to include in an M. Night Shyamalan movie), and other twisted and sadistic devices that it's no wonder someone killed it. But I am not going to give you a Latin lesson in this article for fear you might not make it past this paragraph. Two things really stood out to me about studying Latin—well, there is a third if you count learning how to say 'bite me'.

One of the things that struck me is how the Romans used to read. Sentences in Latin texts during Imperial Rome were constructed differently than most of us are used to. The verb was left at the end of the sentence. It made reading a little Yoda-like: *Across the river and over the fields of Albanon the stymied Celts with urine spiking their hair restlessly waited*. The verb "to wait" was saved for the end. Professor Olcott explained that this created tension in the reading—what verb would be used? What tense of the verb would be used? Was this in the past? The future? What were the Celts doing there with their urine-spiked hair? Granted, the word "waited" is a bit anticlimactic but it set the context of the sentence. The reader had to get to the end of the sentence to know what was going on. Context was everything.

The report basically concluded that the enjoyment of literature has been severely declining over the last twenty years in the USA.

The other thing about Latin that struck me is that words are not always literal, especially the verbs. A Latin verb can have different meanings in different contexts. Imagine if the verb "to wait" (*maneo*) meant several different things. Actually, it does. It can also mean: to stay; to remain; to await; to pass the night; to abide by; to last; to endure. Now, try interpreting the last sentence when the word the author used could have multiple meanings. Imagine translating not only that sentence, but an entire book where every verb and practically every word had many nuances. Reading was a puzzle to be figured out. It was not a passive activity, but an effort.

Earlier generations studied Latin in grammar school. In the United States, it was abandoned by most schools a long time ago. Probably because it was too difficult and teachers had a hard enough time getting kids to learn English effectively. As I mentioned, I didn't study it until college and it was a freakishly difficult subject for me. I may not have picked it up gracefully, but I am glad I studied it. It gave new meaning on how to use language and it taught me not to take the past for granted.

This is why I was so alarmed by a recent report by the National Endowment for the Arts entitled "Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America." The report basically concluded that the enjoyment of literature has been severely declining over the last twenty years in the USA. In fact, I would go a bit further. I would say the reading is dying in America. I read

the sixty page report cover to cover. That's one of the advantages of having studied history and attended grad school. I actually developed the patience to slog through tediously long works and and then wring out the big picture.

And so rather than bore you to tears rehashing it in depth, I will bore you to tears by giving you the key messages that jumped out at me. The messages that told me to wake up. The messages that said that if I don't do something different, my kids will have just enough literary proficiency to read a Happy Meal carton.

Here are some statistics to frighten you (and I quote them almost verbatim, with a teeny bit of emphasis added for dramatic effect):

- Less than half of the adult American population now reads literature (57% read literature twenty years ago; now it is 47%).
- This ten percentage point decline represents a loss of 20 million potential readers.
- Only one-third of adult American men read literature
- Fifty-five percent of adult American women read literature (down from 63% twenty years ago)
- The rate of decline is accelerating (-14% since 1992)
- The higher the education rate, the higher the reading rate **but** reading among every educational level has declined seriously over the last twenty years

And to me, one of the scariest:

- Over the past 20 years, young adults (18-34) have declined from the group **most** likely to read literature to the group **least** likely.

If this has piqued your interest to read the full report, you can access it on-line here:

http://www.nea.gov/pub/ReadingAtRisk.pdf

My teenage niece has borrowed quite a few books from my library of fantasy novels this summer. Recently, her family was over for a barbecue and my niece and I talked about some of our favorite genre books. It dawned on me during the conversation that she was at the age where I fell in love with Terry Brooks' *Shannara* series, my first real addiction to high fantasy—the legacy of which is one of the reasons I helped produce Deep Magic all these years later. I loved the books. I loved the worlds they took me to. I loved not knowing how the books would end, and I loved reading them over again and picking up subtle details I had missed in my first frantic gobbling of the pages. And it terrifies me that twenty years from now, if these trends persist, the audience for fantasy fiction will have shrunk. That perhaps fewer authors will put stories to print, fewer dreamers will share their worlds with us, and we will have lost a bit of true magic in our world. The magic of imagination.

If I haven't thoroughly depressed you yet—sit tight, there's more.

The report also had some other interesting trends and implications regarding creative writing. Let me quote from the report again: "Contrary to the overall decline in literary reading, the number of people doing creating writing—of any genre, not exclusively literary works—increased substantially between 1982 and 2002. In 1982, about 11 million people did some form of creative writing. By 2002, this number had risen to almost 15 million people…an increase of

about 30 percent." Interestingly, the volume went up 30% but the percentage of the population doing creating writing remained the same at 7%.

I find this trend bizarrely interesting—people are reading less but writing more. Why? If there are more authors among us and fewer readers, that is the fastest way to glut the literary market. But very few of those who did any writing got published. The data showed that only 1% (or two million people) were published in 2002. The remaining 6% (twelve million people) were not published. So, if you are an American citizen and have had a story published in Deep Magic, you could literally say you are one in a million. One percent is a discouraging number, isn't it? And since fantasy and science fiction is a genre within the industry, we are an even smaller slice of that total pie.

Included in this study was a trend of those who took creative writing classes. As the previous section mentioned, the raw volume of people writing has increased. In contrast to this, the raw number of people taking creative writing lessons has decreased over the last 20 years. In 1982, about eighteen percent of the population had ever taken creative writing classes or lessons. By 2002, it had fallen to 13.3%, a drop in five percentage points.

This piece of data is even more disturbing to me as an editor. Writing is a craft. Very few people can do it well on an instinctive level. There are so many grammar rules, methods of characterization, plotting constraints, tension devices—it is not an easy creative voice that blends these all and will keep your reader awake for longer than ten minutes. I took just about every creative writing class I could at San Jose State and that was just enough training to get only one of my stories published. So it concerns me that more people are writing blindly, with no instruction at all. The Internet makes it so easy to get published (blogs, anyone?). I have tracked our statistics here at Deep Magic since we started, and we reject around sixty percent of the submissions we get. I am confident that the larger fantasy magazines have an even higher rejection rate. I am also pleased at how many wonderful submissions we do receive each month—as you can tell if you have been reading us for a while, our stories are actually quite good considering we don't pay our authors….yet (here's to hoping next year's fund drive is even better!).

There were other aspects of the study that interested me. For example, take the following quote: "Women are much more likely than men to be frequent readers: 22 percent of women, compared to 11 percent of men…those between 45 and 74 years of age tend to read the most books in a year. About one in five people in this age group is a frequent reader, compared to only one in ten people under 25. Frequent readers also tend to have high levels of education and family income."

Does that mean I'll get richer if I read more books for fun? Wouldn't that be nice.

The rise of technology has proven to be an effective lure in distracting people away from books. The study found a correlation in the decline of reading with increased activity in using the Internet, video games, and portable digital devices. Television, on the other hand, was not found to be a prime suspect in dragging people away from books.

And finally, reading has other effects on society that I had never realized. Literary readers, it turns out, make better citizens. The data correlated reading level to higher levels of volunteerism and charity work, attending sporting events, and being active participants in sports. Perhaps the reason for this is that reading actually gets us to "do" something in our lives while passively browsing the Internet or blasting monsters in video games breeds a generally lazier version of ourselves.

I am afraid that the chief conclusion I had reading this report was that reading is dying

in America, and perhaps around the world. It's a slow death, certainly, and I have had a difficult time wondering what the eventual outcome will be. Will society twenty years from now look back at this e-zine as a quaint old-fashioned pasttime? Will our children be so involved in the immediacy of the Internet and fast-paced media that they lose the ability to creatively or critically think? As I have watched the spread of "instant messaging" with all of its abbreviations (like: ploms … "parent looking over my shoulder" or "sup" and "n2m"—short for 'what's up' and 'not too much'), I wonder if the evolution of our language will become as dead as Latin is today. Instead of words with multiple meanings, we'll have meaningless words. Language itself will be truncated to gibberish.

Or am I being too skeptical here?

All I know is that the report offered me, as a parent, one tiny flickering of hope. My kids need to see **me** reading more. I need to set the example for them. And I don't think a little lesson in Latin now and then will kill them either. Besides, I think they'd like to learn how to say "bite me."

Cheers Prof. Evil Bunny!

Flinteye's Ride

By Sean T. M. Stiennon

The *Flint Shard*'s ramp lowered and a blast of hot air hit my face. I kept the *Shard* fairly cool, so it was a shock to feel the heat of Polod. The red sun filled twice as much of the sky as I was used to.

"Axten," I said, bringing my comm up to my mouth. "Has Hiblon grounded?"

"He has. Five-hundred meters north of us," came the 'bot's voice.

I nodded, even though there was no one to see the movement. "Get your equipment and come out here, then. We'll go over to him."

I stepped out onto the sand. For once, I had forced my feet into boots—the sand on Polod got hot enough to burn most beings if they stayed on it for too long. My shoulders were weighted with a heavy pack containing a few weeks of rations, quite a lot of water, a blanket, a few travel items, and weapons: grenades, a small slug caribine to augment the plasma weapons strapped to my sides, charges for my pistols, and a couple knives in addition to the dagger on my belt.

Axten had set the *Shard* down in a vale by a ring of red stone crags with a few meters of sand all around, protected from both wind and native eyes. I walked toward the rocks as Axten came out with his own pack on his shoulders. The 'bot had mostly the same load, except for the ion rifle he carried—it was his favored weapon, lighter than plasma but just as deadly in skilled hands. His photo-receptors glowed the same color as the sun, and light flashed from his silvery frame.

So when a rich Alliance governor had encountered some business he didn't want the Patrol to know about, my name came up. One of his associates had stolen 500,000 SEUs from the official's account and fled, and the man wanted him back.

"This isn't a good place to spend money. Would you explain to me once more, Jalazar, why you've decided to take another job so soon after a payment of 110,000 SEUs? And a job with Nolthel on it?"

I grinned, showing my fangs. "I was offered a job and I took it. It won't hurt to have more money, will it? Anyway, Nolthel won't hurt you. If he tries, I'll burn his guts out. If you don't get to it first."

"No. But I might have preferred to have more later, and without that 'bot killer along."

"Well, let's just say that I haven't quite recovered from my vacation yet."

I hadn't. A few weeks on Allaua, one of the most luxurious planets in the Alliance, was enough to scar any rational being. Flavor-enhanced foods, indolently soft beds, a fat and lazy Alliance man for an employer, hot tubs and massagers at every turn—it had been almost enough to make me retch. There had been the encounter with the druggers, but even that hadn't been enough to wipe away the stain.

So when a rich Alliance governor had encountered some business he didn't want the Patrol to know about, my name came up. One of his associates had stolen 500,000 SEUs from the official's account and fled, and the man wanted him back. Of all the places to hide, the

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Steven Erikson
Interview

Age: 44
Residence: Winnipeg, Canada
Marital Status: Married
Children: One boy, 13
Hobbies: Fencing, hockey, canoeing
Favorite Book or Author: Homer

Professional and Educational Information

First time you tried to get something published: 1981, a short story entered in a contest in Winnipeg, 'Wooden Trucks' - 2nd place
Authors Most Inspired By: Homer, John Gardner, Steve Donaldson, Roger Zelazny, R. E. Howard, E. R. Burroughs, Glen Cook, Mark Helprin, G. K. Chesterton, Anonymous (Beowulf, Gilgamesh....)
Schools Attended: University of Manitoba, BA—Anthropology/Classics/History; University of Victoria, BFA—Creative Writing/Film Studies; University of Iowa, MFA, Writers' Workshop
Published works (fiction/non-fiction/obituaries): Fiction: as Steve Lundin: 'A Ruin of Feathers', 'Stolen Voices', 'Revolvo', 'This River Awakens'; as Steven Erikson: 'Gardens of the Moon', 'Deadhouse Gates', 'Memories of Ice', House of Chains', 'Midnight Tides', 'Blood Follows', 'The Healthy Dead'
Website URL: nada

Q: Tell us the story of how your first book was published.
A: My first book, 'A Ruin of Feathers' is something called a story cycle—a dozen or so short stories involving the same character. It concerns an archaeologist working and traveling in Central America in the early Eighties. About half of that book comprised my Master's thesis at Iowa. My external advisor was a visiting writer named Peter Nazareth, and he suggested I send a few of those stories to a Canadian publisher, TSAR. My hope was that TSAR would buy one for their magazine; instead, they wrote back saying they wanted the whole series. Writing that (given there was no advance) was made possible by a grant from the Canada Council. One oddity was that TSAR used one of my oil paintings for the cover. Ha! Don't expect that to ever happen again.

Q: How does the internet affect your relationship with readers and/or publishers?
A: The internet has changed (potentially, if the writer is prepared to actually communicate with readers) the relationship between artists and audience, and mostly in a good way. The sheer volume of feedback is unlike anything previously seen (signings don't really count, I think), and it's global. Until lately, I've been in regular contact with the fan-based site, Malazanempire.com, doing Q&A sessions every six months or so; I've not been on the site for some time now, though I

do intend to return to it. This has proved a busy year; not counting two reprints (Gardens of the Moon and Blood Follows) I have five books coming out this year (!).

At the same time, there's a real danger of getting caught up in the whole thing - writers don't need much in the way of excuses to procrastinate, and the internet poses a luring invitation. Additionally, man, all those opinions! Sometimes you read great stuff, other times one's jaw simply drops at the sheer inanity of commentary (very rare on my fans' site, of course) and you sit there, baffled, confounded, discombobulated, even. But it's a good and humbling reminder that both geniuses and idiots have opinions.

Publishers are more and more taking advantage of the internet for purposes of promotion, free promotion at that, and that makes sense. The world runs on word of mouth, after all.

Q: You've set out on an ambitious 10-book series. How did you choose ten (as a magic number) and what are you going to do if new ideas come to you while writing book 6, for instance? How do you plan to balance this "inexorability" with fresh ideas?
A: When I plotted out the series arcs, ten seemed a safe number—I had two late novels in it that were completely open with regards to story, just titles, which meant that if I stumbled onto anything new, story-wise, that I could incorporate into the series, I had the room to do so. Forward planning and all that. I now have one left for such potential (since the other one has since been earmarked to run with one of those 'new' notions). Also, my plotting leaves enough room for improvisation within each novel anyway, I hope. Inexorability needs to be balanced with spontaneity, I think, else we all lose interest.

Q: Do you have any favorite characters? (yours, of course)
A: I hit on temporary favorites while writing each novel. But in general, I'd have to say Karsa Orlong, Shadowthrone, Kruppe, Iskaral Pust, Tehol and Bugg, and Seren Pedac. New list: Udinaas, Fiddler, Bottle, Cutter/Crokus and Scillara (there's a hint regarding the sixth novel).

Q: What influences have helped you become the writer you are?
A: Esoteric ones, in terms of writing. Here, for the first time, I'll try breaking it up into categories:

Story structure: Ernie H. and John Steinbeck
Dialogue: Zelazny/Cook/Hasford/Chesterton
Sentence rhythm: Gardner/Homer/the anonymous writers of Beowulf and Gilgamesh and other epic poems
Theme: not ideas, but moral imperative: John Gardner
Myth-building: Stephen Donaldson
Characterisation: Donaldson/Cook/Hasford/Alice Munro (anyone care to nail down that link?)/Tim Powers/Paul Kearney
Exposition & Setting: any Russian writer you'd care to name (it has to do with animating the environment and the obsession with symbols)
Point of View: a number of exceptional teachers of craft, including W. D. Valgardson and Jack Hodgins

Q: What have you been reading lately?
A: Science Fiction and non-fiction, I keep switching back and forth. I am obsessed with Mars

novels, planet colonization novels, and dystopic fiction. For non-fiction, it's all history stuff, endless amounts, mostly ancient history at that.

Q: How much of your time do devote to writing?
A: I put in four to five hours a day, in the afternoon (I'm not a morning person), five days a week. I can't take a session any longer without burning out, and in that 4-5 hour session I write anywhere from three to twelve pages on my laptop, double-spaced, 10-point Times New Roman. When I go to bed I lie there for an hour or so writing the next scenes in my head, and sometimes I actually remember some of that. Each session starts with re-reading what I wrote the day before, then picking up where I left off, hopefully back in the momentum-thing. Since I write in cafes, I plug in earphones and listen to whatever, so long as it's not what everyone else is listening to.

Q: When you have a time where you don't think you can write another word, what is it that gets you going again?
A: Oddly enough, I don't get those. It just comes out, all over the page (figuratively).

Q: How does it make you feel to be compared with other authors? (i.e. George R.R. Martin and Glen Cook)
A: Depends on the comparison being made! Honestly, it's great. I know where my own influences came from, and to see such writers being kind to my stuff means more than I can say. Writers pick their audiences, in a way, the people they'd like to write to, to write for, and to then discover that it worked, that it reached them, is a singular reward. Just as an aside, I've not read Martin and probably won't until I'm finished my series - he's the one I seem to get compared to the most, and that makes me nervous - better I not see what he's up to book-in-book-out. I do understand we both kill off characters. Cool.

Q: What is your view on violence and strong sexual themes in fantasy literature?
A: That there's a whole lot more violence than sex going on; and maybe it reflects our strange Western notions that deems, as acceptable, graphic violence in the media (film, television, etc), but goes haywire if too much skin is shown. I mean, what's with that, anyway?

In terms of fantasy literature, well, I would hope it is in keeping with the rest of literature (while acknowledging that young people read a lot of fantasy) - what most kids learn they don't get from books, they get it in the school playground, at home, from the tube. What books can do better than those other forms of communication, is provide an ethical context; in other words, actions have consequences, and those consequences are what one has to live with, good or bad, for the rest of their lives. In my fantasy novels, there's violence, often explicit but never pointless. Humanity—in every sense of the term—requires, or needs, or maybe even demands, a redressing of imbalances. For acts of violence there must in turn be gestures of humanity.

Now, plenty of books out there don't bother, and as a result they consciously or unconsciously offer up a nihilistic vision of the world - and that's a cop-out. The writer's either lazy or an outright coward. What I mean by that is: the writer has not worked hard enough, has not applied sufficient relentlessly mindful diligence to what lies beneath the story they're telling, to the world view they're offering up for display, to the attitudes revealed by their particular takes on reality. A writer who thinks he or she has all the answers is nowhere near knowing the right questions, never mind the answers. And a writer afraid or unwilling to challenge their

own belief systems needs a little humility before next putting word to page. With some kind of mindfulness of the human condition operating in the writer, there is no subject that cannot be tackled, as far as I'm concerned.

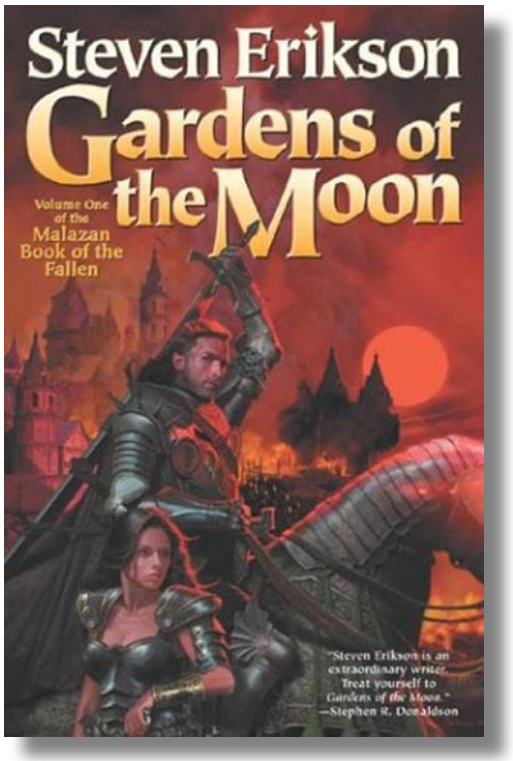
Q: What trends are you seeing in the genre these days?
A: Hard to say (it always is, until well after the fact). Art is both reflective of reality and reactionary to it. We're seeing, I think, the insipid rise of fascism in the world right now, both on an individual, social community scale, and nationally and internationally. Drawbridges are up and fear strides the night. And to paraphrase Yoda, we all know where this will lead.

Someone once told me (and I don't even know if it's true) that, historically, the genre of fantasy reaches its peak during times of world strife, stress, and war. As an expression of escapism? Could be. A measure of the desire to turn away, at least for a little while? Maybe. Of course, in most fantasy novels, evil wears no disguise, and the good are never ugly and always win in the end. So it might be that fantasy reaches through, to some inner need for clarity, to a world less confusing and in its way less frightening.

Mind you, if that's the case, then I'm in trouble, cause my fantasy novels explore a world of disguised evil, the ugly good and the beautiful bad, and victories that prove anything but.

Oops.

pax malazica
steven erikson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Gardens of the Moon
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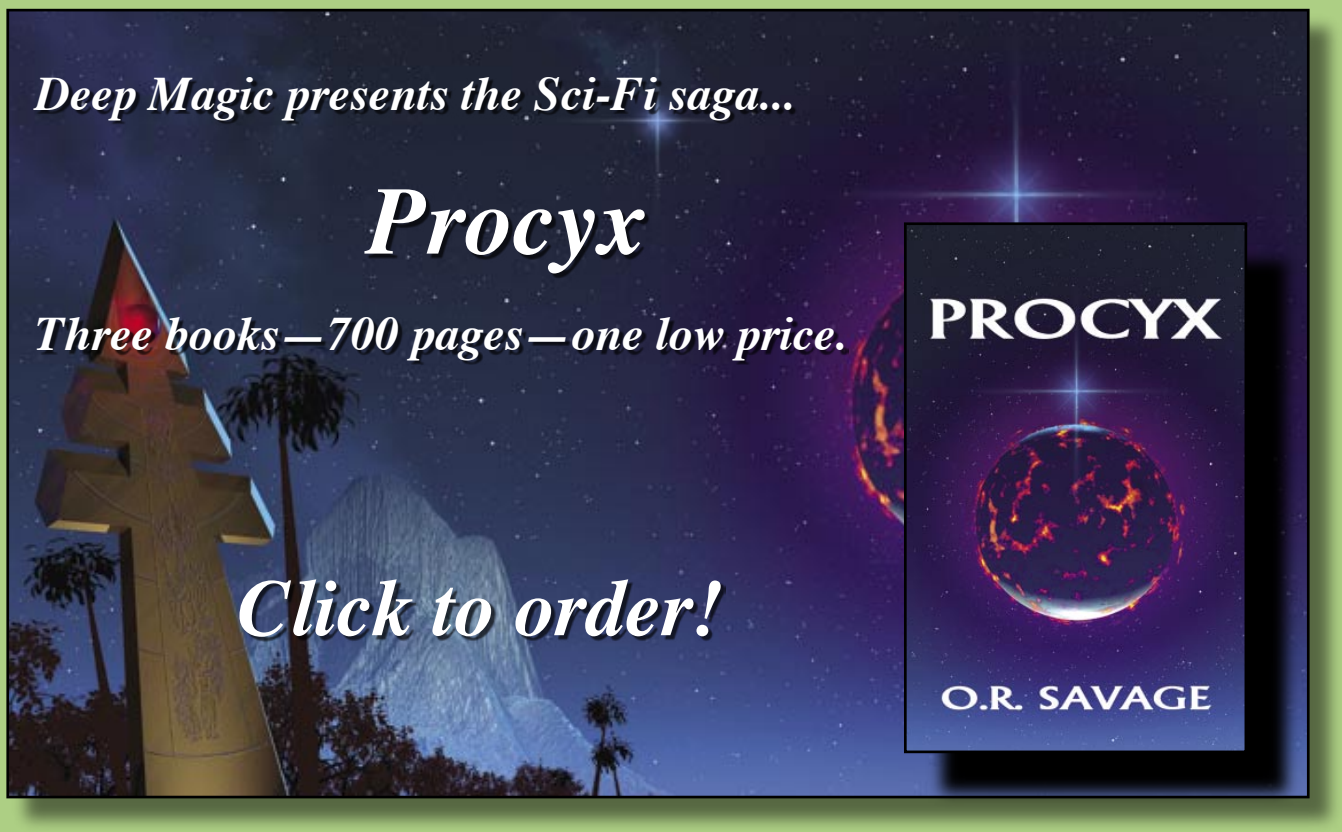

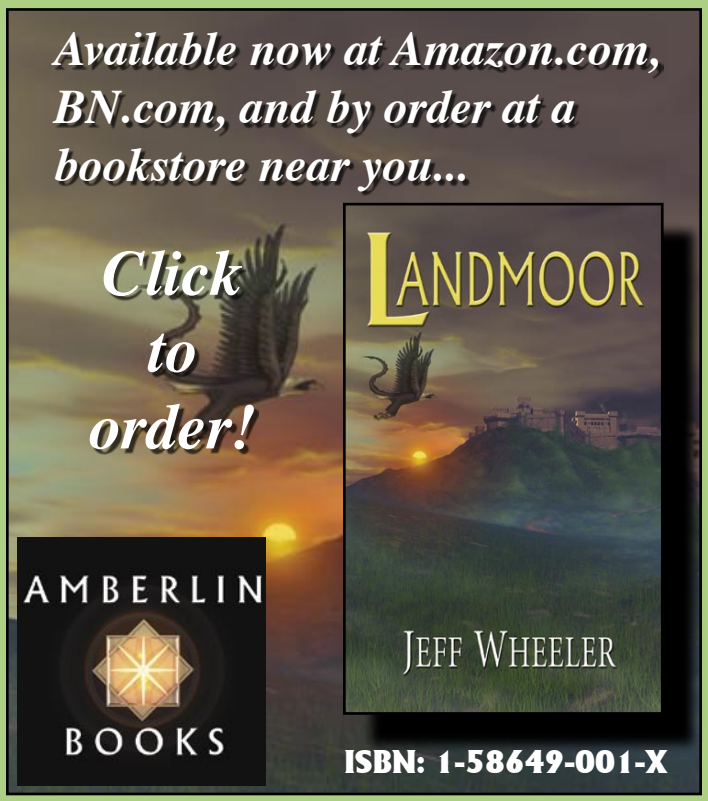

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Silvandom

By Jeff Wheeler

Missy opened the mosaic-glass window, and the sun blinded her. The sky was barren, the clearest blue she had seen in weeks. Normally clouds scudded over the city-island, but in the summer the sun raked the sky from morning until dusk. She cradled the book with both hands, her mind far from the words**,** scrawled like spider webs across its pages. The padded footstool nudged her ankles and she sat back down at the window seat, setting the book down. She had promised to spend the afternoon with her brothers.

Whenever she thought of them, her heart panged with guilt. Here she was, studying ancient records, hearing their whispers from the past in her mind, one of the few in the world to know them. She was learning magic and how to tame and control it, how to focus it to devastating effect. And yet**,** her family was breaking apart. Pin was rarely sober, his heart smitten by a new lass each week. He had quit being a stonemason early on. He had quit so many trades, she wondered if he would end up in a jail rather than a guild.

And Ty—little Ty. He would be eight soon and already qualified to be the general of the Kenatos army. She planted the book down nearby and cringed with the memory. Somehow he had persuaded the entire orphanage to barricade their governess in the privy room. She had been there three days before the priests finally realized the orphanage was leaderless. It had run just as well without her. The woman's wrath still smoldered in Missy's memory. And Tyrus didn't care. He scorned the governess. And somehow, the rancor of an eight year-old endured the beatings she gave him. Oh the bruises. The bruises on his arms and legs. Missy bit her lip.

Leaving his presence, she could hardly shake the chilling feeling of his company. He had several stray whiskers that sprouted from a mole on his cheek that revolted her somehow. The flabby flesh of his throat, the polished fingernails that were cut fastidiously, the smell of onion on his breath.

She looked down at her long, skinny fingers and the rich green fabric of her dress. Her studies brought enough pents that her family lacked for nothing…nothing except her presence. Yet why did it seem that every time she planned to spend time with her brothers, the work of the city loomed large in her face? The city ate pieces of her, leaving crumbs for her brothers. She had to change it. She promised herself she would, but how many times had she already broken her word?

Leaving the *arcana magorium* on the window seat, she rose and left her plush studying chamber in Fivalt Tower. She descended the narrow spiraling steps. Pitch soaked torches illuminated the rough edges. At the bottom, she opened the study door and then turned, waving her hand over the sculpted brass handles, invoking a spell that would prevent anyone else from entering while she was away. She had learned quickly that every thief worth their *carnotha* knew of her rank and standing in the Arch-Rike's eyes. And so she carried little wealth worth stealing, and more than once she had been forced to summon the flames to warn off a persistent

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Say What?
By Ally Wrenn

"I'll take Xenophobia for $20 please, Alex."

Fans of Jeopardy will recognize the format. The contestant picks a category and the amount an answer is worth. Reading, however, should not be a game of answers when it comes to the basic words that make up sentences and ideas. (That's what SATs and GREs are for). There is a place and time for those all important, high dollar words, and knowing when, where and especially how to use them is essential in a good story. After all, you don't want the reader's response to be: "Say what?"

Knowing When, Where and How

How do you know when and where to use those high-dollar words? And for that matter just what are five, ten and twenty-dollar words?

Antidisestablishmentarianism. What? Exactly. That is one of those twenty-dollar words (which, with inflation, could be upgraded to at least a thirty-dollar word). Basically, I think of any high-dollar word as a big word where a smaller or simpler one will do. Big, in this case, does not necessarily mean a long, rare word with an obscure meaning. A simple word such as 'prig' can be considered a high-dollar word, depending on where or when it is used. (The meaning of which is: arrogant, annoying, and akin to snob.)

To know when and where, you have to know and gauge your audience and use your best judgment. Are you writing a literary essay? A high science fiction novel (in which specific science terms are expected)? Or are you writing a children's story? All of these audiences require different considerations. Here are some general guidelines:

1. Make it 'simple'. The simpler the better.

Antell was awed at the vast myriad of crystalline stalagmites surrounding her. If you're writing for children, a sentence like this will likely leave the readers asking that question I spoke of earlier. Just because you know the words doesn't mean your readers will. Use words appropriate for your audience. *Antell's eyes widened at all of the shining rocks around her.*

2. Say something.

All the high-dollar words won't mean much to your reader if you don't use them to tell something about the story. *The impenetrable pogonip was obnubilating. The sheer obfuscation impaired even Jaspen's visual modality.* While it does sound pretty, it doesn't let the reader in on what's happening. (Then again, your light-bulb could be brighter than mine). It can also give the impression of 'priggishness'. Now, what if I said…. *Jaspen had difficulty seeing in the fog.* The light of understanding comes on a bit quicker if you keep it simple and say something.

3. If you don't know it, don't use it.

A good rule of thumb for knowing how to use those big words. Because chances are that if you don't know it, then you're more likely to use it incorrectly. If you must use a word unknown to you, familiarize yourself with the definition and common contexts. Keep in mind that while the thesaurus and dictionary are great tools for any writer, misuse can get you into trouble, conveying at the most something you don't mean, and at the least, an awkward narrative. (This is one of the most common mistakes when works are translated into English). Be sure to pay close attention to those little abbreviations in the dictionary as well. (If you don't know your parts of speech, learn them. Using an adjective as a verb will not improve a reader's opinion of your writing.) The thesaurus is a great way to change up your words when they seem repetitive, but a caution when using your thesaurus- just because the word is a synonym doesn't mean it can replace the one you have.

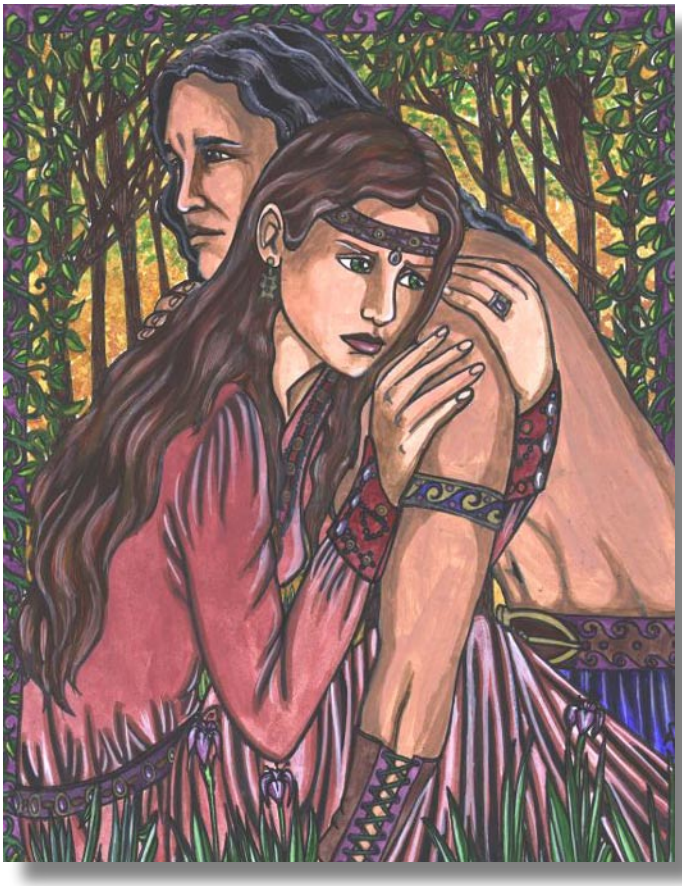
Take the following sentence, for example. *Tev left his horse behind and rubbed at the pain in his left hand.* If I want to replace 'left' with the help of my handy-dandy thesaurus, I could end up with *larboard* (the left side of a ship) if I'm not careful, or : *Tev bequeathed his horse behind and rubbed at the pain in his left hand.* Not only have I used a ten-dollar word where a simpler one would do, but I've also misused the word in the context of the sentence ('bequeathed' referring to a gift after death).

One thing to keep in mind is moderation. Just because you want to say something simply does not mean you can't use a ten-dollar word. If you want to use your writing talents to increase the vocabulary of your readers, (or simply use the words you know, but don't know if your readers will) then incorporate the word such that the context tells the reader what the word means (This is a good method for incorporating foreign or made-up terms as well). *Sunlight accentuated the golden strands of Marna's blond hair, giving it a halo-like quality.* Even if you don't know exactly what 'accentuated' means, you could probably guess that the sunlight made her hair shine.

Don't be afraid to use those high-dollar words. I've read wonderful books where I had to look up the meaning of a word here and there. But that is part of my point- 'here and there.' Your readers shouldn't have to carry around a dictionary just so they can read your work. Spend your word-money wisely. Use your best judgment and keep your audience in mind, both of which will help prevent your story from becoming too expensive for a reader to 'buy' and will keep them from saying '*What*?'

Writing resource: http://www.ewritersplace.com/a320.php

Artist Profile
Autumn Domoslai



Titles:

Top Left: Devoted
Bottom Left: The Fates
Bottom Right: Autumn Spirit

Website: http://www.autumnsrealm.com/

The Ecology of Dryads

Written prior to the outbreak of the Thirteenth Plague
Presented to the Druid Seer
by Tyrus of Kenatos

We live in Kenatos and witnessed the planting.

From our ample chamber and through an open balcony window, we see the great square in the shadow of the Temple of Seitherell. The season of spring has come at last to Kenatos, and it has brought a new oak tree, with leaves newly opened. It stands as a tower in the heavy wagon, the axles groaning under its weight, having traveled a distance of several miles, across the barge and ferried to the island. The tree, dressed in its rough raiment, its crooked branches expanding in a tangle before all the other trees in the place, quietly waits in vigil. One of its sisters is prostrate on the ground with roots exposed to the smoke-choked air. On the place where it stood, we planted it, there to thrive. We hope.

For years the newly come oak had stood along the road, a waymarker of sorts, under the grim guard of another, mighty oak, beneath which a venerable druid had often sat, with children and travelers listening to his tales, the great oak feeding from his stories. The younger one, eager, fragile, and curious. As all Dryads are.

The younger oak tree had indeed hearkened to the tales. Perhaps the Dryad who lived in it was a child herself. The Dryad's existence consisted of sunshine, the singing of birds, the cluck of travelers' tongues, the creak of wagon wheels bearing goods to the island city. Perhaps she was most intrigued by human voices, elvish songs, dwarven chants, or gnomish games. We know she understood the language of men and elves as well as she understood that of animals. Butterflies, hummingbirds, dragonflies—anything that could take wing visited her. They could all talk to her, embedding their secrets and knowledge like seeds in her mind, to sprout and grow with the force of her imagination. They told of the villages, the vineyards, of the forests of Silvandom, of the old castle in Stonehollow with its parks and canals and ponds. Places she would never wander. Places she could not wander. For as a Dryad, she was bound to her tree. Her life-force entwined with it.

Some say the Dryads are the incarnation of helplessness. They represent all things fragile, all things fair, all things defenseless. Even a rose can protect itself with thorns. But Dryads can harm no living thing. Should the woodsman come with a sharpened axe to fell her tree, she can do nothing against him. Many a Dryad has been slain unwittingly, because they are too shy to beg aid. The Druids and Finders, we know, can determine which trees they haunt. And they will fight to protect these strange incarnations. Quiet they are, like the wings of butterflies. And helpless as a babe thrown in a river.

Perhaps it was fear when the old druid died. Perhaps it was loneliness. We know the Dryad felt happiness, but her heart stung like nettles that every bird, every bumblebee, every grasshopper was much better off than she. Even the maggot-born fly could skim about more in the world, beyond the farthest reaches of her sight. Kenatos was great and full of glory, but she could only comprehend a little morsel of it. The tiny wrens could get there; but not she.

It was last summer that it changed. Every creature, every flower, lay beneath an oppressive mantle sewn by the sun. Even the travelers seemed languid, too. And a summer

storm arose from the blasted lands of Boeotia. A terrible, racing summer storm drenched the inner plains matted with thirst-parched grasses with refreshing rain. The clouds boiled black, the leaves upending. Colors danced in the sky before a wind arose, the freakish wind that whirls and blasts. Those in the city saw the finger of Seitherell come down from the sky, a long gray finger full of smoke and dust. And the finger smote the plains outside the city and the old oak that had shielded the Dryad's own tree since her first awareness. It harmed her not.

The old oak was torn from its roots as the rain streamed down. And so did the tears of the old druid, who had delivered all of his memories into that majestic tree. His entire life's work had perished, lost from the world forever. They say he lay still by the tree, hugging it, and there he died.

Fear struck the Dryad. A cold, terrible fear. Who would protect her now? Who would keep the woodsmen away? What had once been a thick copse of oak, shielding her tree from the eyes of the unworthy, had been reduced to her lone tree, her life-tree, her prison. The Dryad pleaded with the bees to fly away, to find a new druid to tend her and protect her. Someone to build walls around her, like the city Kenatos itself, and save her from the fate of so many of her sisters.

This wish became an intense longing—became her single thought. Her pleas were not answered. The druids, of course, had larger forests to tend. How could they spare any one man to tend a single tree amidst thousands? She despaired. The sounds of her weeping startled the travelers on the way to Kenatos. Which is how we heard of her plight.

In the quiet silent night, while the full moon was shining, we came to the Dryad to warn her. "If thou goest to the city of magic; and if thou takest root there to enjoy the sea breezes, the smoke-filled air, and the sunshine there, thy life shall surely be shortened. The span of years that await thee here amid the free thrall of nature shall shrink. It may lead to thy early destruction."

"I accept it, wizard," she said to us.

"Thou dost not know the pull of humanity. Thy longings will increase, thy desire to become one of them will grow like the storm that felled the other tree. Thy tree itself will be as a prison to thee."

"It is already thus. I may mingle with mankind and it not harm me."

"Yet if thou quit thy cell, what shall befall thee?"

"I will surely die should I leave it over-long. I choose that fate. Take me there, wizard."

"And what if some man, enchanted with thy beauty, take thee by force away from thy tree? Men are ever duplicitous."

"The same fate doth await me here. If I am parted over-long from my tree, my life-spark shall blot out. I would live no longer than a humble fly, a day and a night, no more. Torment me no longer, wizard. Take me there!"

"I will. If thou still desires it." She did.

When the gray dawn stole into the land, and the moon turned pale and began to ebb, sturdy men from Stonehollow appeared with spades and poles. The laborers dug round the roots of the tree, deeper and deeper, and beneath it. A wagon was brought out later in the day, drawn by many horses, an entire army of horses to stir envy in the heart of the king of Wayland. And her tree was hoisted, with its roots clinging to the crumbs of earth. The roots were preserved with nets and matting. The oak tree was lifted on the wagon and secured with chains. The journey to Kenatos began.

The twigs and the leaves of the young oak trembled in the first moments of its being moved; and the Dryad trembled.

"Do all thy sisters dwell in oak?" we asked her.

"Nay, wizard. My sister Aegierus dwells in a poplar. Karya dwells in a hazel. Balanis in a walnut. Craneia dwells in a cherry grove. Others dwell in apple or myrtle. There are others as well."

"And what is thy name, sweet Dryad?"

"I will not tell thee, wizard."

"Then I shall name thee Phae."

"As it please you. I have many names among mortals."

The wheels turned; the distant city approached like a turtle. The region was changed, even as the clouds change. New vineyards, forests, villages, villas appeared—all of the sights that had been shared by the tiny minds of bees and larks. To the Dryad, houses seemed to be rising out of the earth—more and more—thicker and thicker, congregating on the shores of the great lake. The chimneys had the shape and look of flower-pots ranged side by side, or in rows one above the other, on the roofs.

Across a ferry, the wagon came. Through gates as tall as the giants living east of Alkire, she passed, making her shiver with anticipation.

"The very edge of the world must surely meet us first," she gasped.

"Not even a portion of it. The world is greater still."

The Dryad, in her tree, was now in the midst of Kenatos. The heavy wagon stopped on a little square planted with trees. The high houses around had all of them balconies, from which the inhabitants gazed upon the young fresh tree, a substitute for the dead tree that lay stretched on the ground. The Dryad felt her tree being lifted from the wagon to be placed in the spot where it was to stand. The roots were covered with earth, and fresh turf was laid on top. Blooming shrubs and flowers in pots were ranged around, like a little garden in the square.

The tree that had been killed by the fumes of magic, the steam of kitchens, and the bad air of the city, was put upon the same wagon and driven away. We would not allow the axemen to butcher it in her presence, perhaps making a table or burly chairs from its corpse.

"The buildings are so tall," she whispered to us. "Why cannot I see the rest of the city?"

"The lure afflicts thee already. Soon thou shalt wander from here."

"But what is beyond? What causes that shadow?"

"It is the Temple of Seitherell."

"But why cannot I see it?"

"Thou must stand on the balcony first. Thou canst not see it from the garden floor."

The Dryad sensed her doom. It was a city for the curious. And Dryads were ever that.

She sat at the foot of the tree, so young, so fair! The stars saw her, and blinked at her. The magic lamps saw her, and gleamed and beckoned to her. How delicate she was, and yet how blooming!—a child, and yet a maiden. In her nut-brown hair clung a cluster of acorns. For many days and moons she sat as still as sleeping moths. Then one night she sprang up, and hurried away. Could any one else have followed her with his eyes, he would have seen how marvelously her gown and her form changed, according to the nature of the house or the place whose light happened to shine upon her.

But she wandered too far from her tree. She did not understand that the city was like a maze. And when the pangs came on her, to return and take nourishment from the roots of the tree, she was lost. And no one found her until they saw her crumpled form, like the brittleness of autumn leaves, splayed in a grove in Westerfall, arms tightly clutching a timid oak.

I learned much from her. Much more I wish I had learned. The oak in the square below

my balcony languishes. The secrets of the old druids, perhaps even a secret for the cure of the Plague, lay buried 'neath its bark where neither druid nor scribe can read it any longer.

Tyrus of Kenatos

Author's note: Special thanks to Hans Christian Andersen for the inspiration.

The Transference of Magic

By Stephen Nelson

Edwin sat back to look at the transference potion, finally done, ready, rotten. He had no idea which wizard invented the putrid brown drink, but at this stage in his life he didn't care much. His head hurt. His mind throbbed with too many memories. He had lived too fully, too much for any one person. He would drink the bitter, acrid potion and piss the magic out of himself. Then he would be done with life.

"But not yet, eh Eighty-Eight?" he said, looking at the brown dog sitting at the room's door. A candle on the table next to the drink provided the only light. "I've still got to cut my tongue out, haven't I?"

Eighty-Eight acknowledged Edwin's comment by raising her head three inches and then giving a quiet, "Woof." As a puppy she had eaten a carrot with legs, which had grown in soil fertilized with transference urine. The magic had given her understanding that it would be nice to have a little more intelligence, but it had not granted her the ability to speak. Other dogs had gained speech capabilities, but that didn't mean they were intelligent. They could babble and jabber with the craziest of humans, but *she* could understand things better than most. She lowered her head onto her paws, ears settling back onto the floor.

"And I know exactly what I'm going to do with it, don't I?" Edwin responded. "Not exactly a tough choice."

Nine hundred and seventy-six years of life had taught Edwin a lot, and he had been planning for over eighty exactly what he was going to do with his magic.

Nine hundred and seventy-six years of life had taught Edwin a lot, and he had been planning for over eighty exactly what he was going to do with his magic. Once he drank the potion of transference, all of the magic in his body would be drawn into his urine, so that a day after drinking the potion he would literally pass the magic out of himself. Whatever living thing came in contact with or drank the urine would absorb his magic, inherit his powers. For many years he had planned to die on his thousandth birthday, but had long since abandoned the idea.

With a sigh, Edwin clamped the lid onto the jar. Once, over a year before, when Edwin had started brewing the potion, the container had been clear. Now a thin film of brown mold grew up the inside and an occasional small insect burrowed into it, to be seen through the glass. Which kind of insect, Edwin didn't know; the potion required too many variants to keep track of.

"Yes. I can't give the magic to Broady, can I? Not to that twit, that *dullard*. The man couldn't conjure a cup of water if he had a lake and a cup. No, my magic is too much for him. I've drunken too much magic to pass it on to him."

Eighty-Eight snorted, but did not move or twitch an ear. She closed her eyes.

"And those wizards that give their magic to Celeste—they're plain fools, aren't they? I'm glad I won't be around much longer to see what she decides to do eventually. Benevolent! Ha! Charitable! Ha! She wants the magic for herself, doesn't she? Nobody even knows how long she's been getting a sip of magic here, a taste of magic food there. For all we know, she's just biding

continued on page 99

Last month in my Point of View article, I challenged you all to write a scene or short story in the second person that I would like. I was pretty confident I wouldn't have to make good on my agreement to publish one of them. Well, Bill Snodgrass sent in the following story, and dang it, I liked it! So congrats to Bill for showing me what I never thought I'd see: a second person story I could enjoy. So the challenge was given and accepted, and I lost. Hopefully this won't become the standard around here...

The Embodiment of Total Frustration

By Bill Snodgrass

It is something everyone has known, you tell yourself.

This time, however, it exceeds everything—anything you have ever experienced.

You are frustrated.

It is like that dream where you are in a car careening out of control with no steering and no brakes. Nothing you do changes the course of the car, though you stomp the pedal and twist frantically at the wheel.

It started simply enough. No fault of your own. It was an act of terrorism—not the 21st century kind of terrorism. Not a bomb left in a satchel. Not a suicide bomber walking into a crowded market.

Much worse.

But as for your place in it, you feel helpless, totally frustrated at your paralysis. Had you done something—anything at all—to contribute to the situation, the feeling might have been grief, or self-abasement.

But the truth of the matter, when you consider all the facts, is that you had no part in your circumstances. Nothing you would have reasonably done could have prevented it. Nothing you could have reasonably foreseen could have turned the events otherwise. It was an act of terror. Nothing more.

You march forward, a blank smile plastered on your face, 35mm camera around your neck. In your hand, you carry a tour map, and in your pocket are tokens for the Metro. You look like—you are—a tourist, but it is not by your will, but theirs.

While you were still young and the world around you slept, ate, graduated high school and what not, they were hatching the beginnings of a scheme. Really quite brilliant. Really, in fact, genius.

The idea seeded itself in their midst, but was nearly ignored as too far-fetched, even for them. One among them, though, was convincing enough and, by and by, the idea became a plan. Long term, certainly, but a plan.

You imagine them saying, "It will be years, but the infidel will suffer dearly when this is completed."

The scheme began working its way toward you. Oh, not by any direct path, but

circuitously. Now you know, but when it began, you simply slept your young and innocent nights in peace. They told you about it. Why not? You have no power, now. There is nothing you can do, now.

They began with a pleasant faced sympathizer. A young lady, gifted with words of persuasion. She hid away the truth of the scheme, veiling it in a promise of hope for people who suffered—a great hope to quiet the pain of the most tormented of the mentally ill. Veiled as all but a cure for schizophrenia, she ultimately enlisted the greatest minds of medicine and bioengineering.

Her part in the affair was forgotten, long before Nobel Laureates became involved. Her part was subtle. A quaint word here, a suggestion there, a teary-eyed plea for help. As the idea took a life of its own, and prestigious names were added to the roster of those on the project, she was forgotten. Others of them took a place to watch.

"I am sorry," the guard says, "picture taking is not allowed in here. You'll have to check your camera into one of the lockers provided down that corridor."

The camera was just part of the costume. They do not need you to have it.

"Thank you," you reply. They are not your words, but they come from your mouth, strange emanations from some foreign source.

They watched the project of mercy for years. Watched as the scientists from the drug companies conceded and agreed that they could, indeed, make money on a permanent solution to the random thoughts attacking the mind of the person with schizophrenia.

Meanwhile, other researchers—not those of the drug company, but rather *theirs*—were developing new ways to make things explode. Means undetectable to latest technology and canines alike. This was key. The two innovations would marry into the scheme hatched that long-ago day. Work on both projects endured the passing of decades.

Finally, someone at the biotech company declared proudly, "We have a working prototype."

They told you this. Why not? There is nothing you can do, now. You have no power, now.

The biotech company should have had better security, but then again, who would have suspected? The woman who stole the back-up prototype had worked on the project for years. She was a scientist there. She had been there since the very beginning. They had put her there even before the pleasant faced young lady had completed her part in the scheme.

As you step through the metal detector, you feel nothing and nothing is detected, but you know it has begun. The scanner, though it did not detect their malice, set it in motion.

If you could, you would resist, but you can't. Your body plods on against your will.

You were chosen at random. Truly at random. You were in the train station in Boston. Your plans were to go to Manhattan, but you did not end up there. Instead, they decided your innocent face was just plain enough to do the job.

The years—decades of research had yielded the exact location in the brain of the origin of thought. It had accomplished the replication of the process from organic to electronic, and in the end, the prototype was complete.

Meanwhile, *their* chemists found a means to hide not only a high power explosive charge from the noses and beams that diligently sought such things, but also to infuse the chemical agents with deadly plutonium dust. Detonation would scatter the poison far beyond the

enormous effect of the blast.

Spirited away from the Boston station, you rode in a dark van. Darker in your mind than it really was, blackened by the drugs coursing through your veins. At the back of your neck, below your collar, a small incision was made. You remember a prick, nothing more. The prototype was implanted.

Flipping a switch, they took control. Not only could they dampen the unwanted thoughts haunting the mind of one with schizophrenia, they could also implant the thoughts they desired. Months passed as they perfected their adaptation. Then, once satisfied that you would be the marionette they wanted, they shipped you away dressed like a tourist.

Your feet obey commands not your own as you march on behind the others who follow the guide. She is talking.

"Now, up ahead, is the Lincoln Bedroom…" she says. There is nothing you can do, now. You have no power. You exist now, only the embodiment of total frustration.

The End

Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Fantasy

Gardens of the Moon

By Steven Erickson

The Empire of Malazan has been usurped by Laseen, who once served the previous Emperor as Commander of the Claw. After a bloody purge, the Empire battles with the other forces at work in the world. One such battle occurs outside the city of Pale where the Malazan forces face off against an immortal, the leader of the Tiste Andii who dwells in a floating mountain of black basalt with his people.

The world is full of soldiers, deadly assassins, and mages who access their powers through paths of power called Warrens. There are Warrens showing the Path of Healing, Stone, Death, Shadow, Sea, Darkness, Sky, Land, and Light. There are also other Warrens that only beings of greater power can access. When the magics from these Warrens clash, destruction and carnage destroy everything living around. *Gardens of the Moon,* the first book in the Malazan Book of the Fallen, weaves many intertwining storylines rich with betrayal and schemes. The main threads are led by the major characters, but there are hosts of other characters that complicate the plot.

One lead character is Paran, the wealthy outcast son who makes his life as a soldier and servant of the Empire. He tracks a killer involved in the massacre of a fishing village. He quickly becomes the pawn of Empress Laseen and her Adjunct as well as the pawn of the gods.

Another is Sergeant Whiskeyjack of the Bridgeburners, one of the oldest battle-seasoned groups in the Malazan army. After the destruction at the city of Pale, Whiskeyjack takes his men to Darujhistan to infiltrate the city. Because of their past loyalty to the previous Emperor, the Bridgeburners have been marked for destruction. But Whiskeyjack hasn't stayed alive for so many years without loyal men and a few clever tricks.

Within the city of Darujhistan dwells a corrupt city council, but the true government is run by thieves and assassins who stalk the rooftops and kill each other with skill and ruthlessness. One of the city thieves is young Crokus whose luck turns on finding a special coin, marking him as another pawn of the gods. And when gods play off against each other, the entire earth trembles.

Gardens of the Moon is a complicated book. The author does not waste time trying to catch the reader up in his magic system, politics, or history; instead, we are plunged into the complicated morass of a corrupted Empire and into the tug of war of gods that are only too human in their motivations. The cast is truly staggering and some of the plot threads are more interesting and engaging than others, especially since the reader is left to unravel the motivations behind each player. I found the magic system interesting and believable and the politics and characters of Darujhistan more compelling than Whiskeyjack or his Bridgeburners. But all are needed to season this complex stew.

Possible Objectionable Material: As a military novel involving war and atrocities as well as lethal assassins, there is a good deal of violence and carnage, but none of it was over the top. The language was milder than I expected, considering the number of soldiers in the story. The few sexual liaisons all occurred off screen.

(Reviewed by Jeff Wheeler)

continued on next page

Book Review: Fantasy

Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn trilogy (The Dragonbone Chair, Stone of Farewell, To Green Angel Tower)

By Tad Williams

Simon is a kitchen scullion at the castle Hayholt, center of High King Prester John's empire. But now the king lies dying, with two sons surviving him: Elias, his elder son who has never recovered from the loss of his wife, and Josua Lackhand, ruler of a small fortress in the far north of the kingdom. John dies, leaving the throne in Elias' hands, as young Simon works as an apprentice for Doctor Morgenes, an old scholar whose room in the Hayholt is filled with mysterious books and artifacts-a room that is much bigger inside than outside.

Quickly, unrest stirs in the Hayholt and throughout the land of Osten Ard. For Elias is consorting with the priest Pryrates, rumored to be a necromancer and a sorcerer, and there are rumors of a dark power stirring in the north. Immortal Norns have been spotted for the first time in many years. The many nations conquered by John have their own conflicts-the Dukes are unstable on their thrones, and Elias' cronies threaten to snatch them away. Simon observes it all while learning history under Morgenes, and matters come to a head when he discovers that Josua has been imprisoned by Pryrates. Simon rescues him with Morgenes' help, then flees the Hayholt as his tutor is destroyed by Pryates and Elias' soldiers.

Simon soon finds himself caught up in a war against the Sithi King Ineluki, dead five hundred years but kept in existence by sheer hate as the Storm King. Now, with the Norns and their silver-masked queen as his allies, he seeks to destroy the men who killed him and who brought down the ancient Sithi Empire. With the help of Elias and Pryrates, he works to enter the mortal world and reign again. As Simon soon discovers, the only method of stopping him is presented by the three great swords of Osten Ard's past: Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn.

Thus begins Tad Williams' epic trilogy *Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn*. Osten Ard is quickly plunged into a cataclysmic conflict, fought with sword and sorcery, with humans and elven Sithi on both sides. Prester John's empire falls into chaos, and Elias struggles to destroy his brother, who fights against the powers of darkness which Elias has chosen as his allies. Simon is caught up in the midst of this conflict, a kitchen boy forced to become a warrior.

The three books follow a convoluted and detailed plot, with hundreds of named characters. Some are quite minor, but Williams deftly juggles several viewpoint characters and weaves an intricate story of terrible hates past and present, of evil that can rend apart the universe itself, and of heroes who find the strength to oppose it. Simon befriends many as he joins Josua and Morgenes' network of friends is fighting Elias and gathering the artifacts necessary to defeat the Storm King: Isgrimnur, deposed Duke of Rimmersgard, Miriamele, Elias' kind-hearted daughter, Binabik, a scholar in training and a troll of the far north, and Jiriki, a prince of the Sithi, to name a few. Each of the major characters stands out as a colorful and real individual. Several astounding twists keep the plot moving at a riveting pace.

Williams' world building is superb. The world of Osten Ard not only has an interesting present, it has a past-a past filled made up of bloody battles, of ancient hatreds, of empires both human and Sithi risen to glory and then demolished. This history is never forced, and its effects on the present are dramatic, and many of the revelations are startling. Many characters have complex pasts of their own. Religion in Osten Ard, at least for the great part of society, is that of Aedonism, a religion which closely parallels Catholicism in many aspects. This is shown in a generally positive manner, although many characters have doubts about their faith at times, and the Aedonite Church is generally shown to be holy.

The writing is just as good. The descriptions are supremely vivid, the characterizations are excellent, the dialogue is smooth and entertaining, and the pace is gripping. Williams has a particular knack for metaphors and similes-he always has the perfect one to fit what he wants to describe, and they add a great deal of depth to his writing.

The Sithi and Norns, which are in many ways similar to elves, rise far above the stereotypes of high fantasy races. They are alien and savage as much as they are

wise and powerful. Few men can ever understand their motives, and yet Simon forges a lasting friendship with their prince.

Williams even manages to include some overall themes of suffering and hope, without weighing down his narrative in the slightest. Nearly all the characters are put through intense suffering during the course of the trilogy, and at times the power of evil seems indomitable. Williams shows, rather than tells, how one can keep hoping against such conflicts, and how our suffering and our travails are what makes us better men. Simon, in particular, journeys the long road from boyhood to manhood-a road paved with suffering.

All in all, Williams has created a masterpiece of modern fantasy which is well worth a look from anyone who wants a well-written, intelligent, and nail-bitingly exciting read.

Possible objectionable material: Some sexual material, mostly with fade-outs before it gets graphic, also easily skimmed over just by going to the next line break; a good deal of somewhat bloody combat violence; some fearful locales, creatures, and sorcery; one extended episode of non-graphic torture; much cursing using Aedon's name.

(Reviewed by Sean T. M. Stiennon)

Book Review: Classic Fantasy

The Color of Magic

By Terry Pratchett

I must admit that it is with much trepidation that I am reviewing this book. *The Color of Magic* by Terry Pratchett is the first of the Discworld books, a series so loved that each new Discworld book (and there are nearly 30 now) becomes a bestseller when it appears. It has been said that 10 percent of the books sold in England each year are fantasy and that one in ten fantasy books sold are Terry Pratchett books. Do the math, and you can see that if numbers bespeak quality, Pratchett is where it's at.

Luckily, there is something behind the success of Discworld. It is not a marketing phenomenon (although there are some tie-in merchandise of maps, CDs, and comic books, as well as guides to the Discworld), nor is it just a flash in the pan, being 25 years old and sales better than ever. No, it's the fact that these are enjoyable books that have something more to them than just a few good lines.

Ironically, though, the first of the Discworld books is one of the weaker of the books. But 'weaker' is a comparative: this is still a fun and enjoyable book.

For those who are new to the genre, or who just don't know, the Discworld is a flat world that rides on the backs of four elephants who are in turn standing on the shell of the great world turtle, A'Tuin, who is swimming through space for a destination known only to A'Tuin. Where we have electricity on our world, the Discworld has magic, magic so thick that it even slows down the speed of light, creating some wonderful sunrises and sunsets.

The Color of Magic introduces us to the Discworld through a travel story, similar to the old Bing Crosby/Bob Hope 'road' movies. The story opens with the burning of the Discworld's greatest city, Ankh-Morpork. Fleeing from that city are two guilty-looking characters: the failure of a wizard, Rincewind, and a short, pudgy man with big glasses and a chest made of sapient pearwood, Twoflower. Twoflower, it turns out, comes from a distant continent on the Disc and is the Discworld's first tourist. He shows up one day in Ankh-Morpork, innocently throwing money around (much to the glee of Ankh-Morpork's seedier denizens, which is pretty much all the city, including its Patrician), and wanting to experience great adventure. Rincewind falls in with Twoflower accidentally and then is forced to become his guide. Twoflower, it turns out, is an insurance agent, something Ankh-Morpork has never encountered. He sells a fire-insurance policy to a tavern owner, and before you know it, he and Rincewind are trying to escape the blazing city.

Having escaped with their hides intact does not preclude more adventures, though, and the remainder of the book is a series of escapades wherein Rincewind and Twoflower encounter one fantasy cliché after another.

Pratchett's sharp wit, however, does not reduce the book to pages and pages of one-liners (although they're

there, including some atrocious puns) that lead up to a humorous 'twist' at the end. No, these are *stories* that exist to be told and the major portion of the humor is from the plain silliness of the world, especially where what it takes seriously parallels our own, resulting in side-splitting parody.

The book itself is really a set of four novellas, with each story (misadventure?) standing alone. They can be read individually, but reading them as a unit does give a feel of forward movement as Rincewind and Twoflower move from Ankh-Morpork to the edge of the Disc.

As I said earlier, *The Color of Magic* is one of the weaker of the Discworld books. The stories exist mostly to poke fun at the fantasy conventions and tropes that were at that time (1979) becoming an industry. Missing here is the more insightful analysis of the human condition that is more apparent in *Equal Rites* or *Small Gods*. But even though it is thematically sparser than what comes later, it is still an enjoyable and fun read and a good introduction to the Discworld series.

Possible objectionable material: There are a few jokes centered around the fantasy mainstays of whores.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Science Fiction
Man O'War
By William Shatner

Ambassador Benton Hawkes has just returned from evaluating a situation in Australia. As is his habit, Hawkes decided the case based upon its merits rather than the pocketbooks of the parties involved. As a result, he has angered some of Earth's most powerful people. Thoroughly expecting to be stripped of his position as ambassador, Hawkes is surprised and suspicious when asked to accept a new assignment on Mars.

The situation with Mars is desperate. Colonists on the red planet are unhappy with their current living and working conditions. Earth fears riots on Mars would stop the shipment of materials people on Earth have become dependent upon. Stopping shipments for even a week or two would cause mass starvation on Earth.

Hawkes is determined not to go. He can't bear the thought of living in tunnels on the barren planet, eating fungus, and giving up things like fresh air, trees, and steak. However after two assassination attempts, he heads for Mars to inspect the situation and to investigate who is behind the attempts on his life.

I freely admit that I picked up Man O' War because I was curious about William Shatner's work as a writer. I was pleased to find that I enjoyed his work.

In *Man O'War*, Shatner delivers a very entertaining action-adventure tale. Shatner thrusts his character Hawkes into situations where he must use his skills in everything from hand-to-hand combat to political strategy in order to survive.

The strength of this book is definitely the plot. The characters and dialogue, while not bad, aren't enough to keep readers intrigued. The action and surprises along the way, however, keep the reader's interest from waning.

Possible objectionable material: Some very strong language and violence.

(Reviewed by Rochelle Buck)

continued from page 11

The aged barkeep glanced at Ionas and nodded. He poured two mugs full of ale and limped over to them. The old man was thin to the point of sickness, and his Adam's Apple bobbed disconcertingly. The barkeep placed the mugs in front of Ionas and reached for the shiny coin. Before he found what he was reaching for, Ionas' hand snapped out like a whip and grabbed it first.

The barkeep glared at him through rheumy green eyes.

Ionas smiled. In his dexterous grip, the coin flipped and danced across his sinewy fingers as though alive. His blue eyes never left the clouded, watery gaze of the barkeep. "We've not yet touched the brew, and already you would take our money?" Ionas held the man's gaze until the barkeep turned away.

"Andral, is this slop worth paying for?"

Andral raised his glass and sniffed at the amber liquid. He wrinkled his nose and shook his head. "No," he said.

Ionas laughed. "Come now, just because the smell of feces was stronger than the smell of urine in this hole, is no reason not to be fair. At least try some before you decide."

Andral shook his head. "I swear to you, this is the last wager I shall ever lose . . ."

Ionas' white teeth flashed in the flickering torchlight.

With a look of disgust, Andral raised the filthy mug to his lips and drank. As Andral drained the draught, Ionas watched a few of the tavern's patrons rise to their feet.

When Andral was done, he slammed the mug down atop the bar. With the back of his hand he wiped his mouth then shook his head. "Pig piss," he declared.

"Pig piss?" Ionas asked. Behind Andral, the others began to move forward. From across the murky tavern, Ionas heard the scraping of metal on leather as blades were slipped free.

"Pig piss," Andral said again.

"Does that mean you wouldn't pay for it?"

"Would you pay for a glass of pig piss?"

"Hmm, I see your point." Ionas turned to the barkeep. "So, there you have it. Surely you can't expect us to pay for pig piss, can you?"

The barkeep leaned forward and smiled, showing off his four black and yellow teeth. "You'll be paying for more than that," he said. With his head, he indicated the advancing mob.

Ionas glanced at the advancing men, then threw his head back and laughed. "Did you hear that, Andral? This barkeep has wit!"

Andral shook his head and cast aside his heavy cloak. Then he drew forth the great war-hammer, Agrona, that rested inside his belt.

"Wit," Ionas said loudly, as though nothing of consequence had happened. He deposited the coin in the pouch at his waist. "From a barkeep, no less. You see Andral, it's like I always say: you travel long enough, and far enough . . ." Then Ionas, too, tossed aside the heavy folds of his cloak. Across the front of his green tunic, held in place by a leather belt, twelve daggers nestled like pit vipers. "And you never know what you'll find." Ionas drew two daggers, and then turned. The battle was joined.

It did not last long.

The five men who attacked them were seasoned warriors and cutthroats. They made their living inflicting pain and death on the guilty and innocent alike. They also had the advantage of having worked together in the past. They knew each other's strengths and weaknesses; could exploit and account for them. And it was their home that was being invaded, their sovereignty

that was being challenged. Strangers never came to the Hoard. There was a reason for that.

Unfortunately, the reasons—all five of them—mattered little to Ionas dan Ayre and Andral Voss.

The five men smiled as they approached. A hammer and some daggers; one too cumbersome, the other a set of toys. Ionas had heard it before.

Three of the encroaching men were dead before the battle had even properly begun, each dying with a grunt, eyes crossed and straining upwards to glimpse the 'toy' protruding like a unicorn's horn from his forehead.

It was Andral's turn. The burly warrior spun. In his large hands his hammer whirled as if it weighed less than nothing. Two of the remaining men backed away, raising their swords in an effort to parry the onslaught. Their swords were smashed like kindling, like their ribs and spines.

Then there was one.

"It happens so quickly, doesn't it?" Ionas said with quiet sadness, as he absently fingered the hilt of one of his daggers, "Death, I mean." For a moment, the man's gaze flickered between Ionas and Andral. Then he glanced down at the dead men all around him and ran.

Ionas smiled at Andral, then turned and sat back down at the bar. Running his finger around the lip of his glass, he stared at the barkeep and heard Andral grunt.

Ionas was always amazed at the sound the hammer made as it smashed its way through the air. He knew the mighty weapon had once belonged to the legendary Witch Lord, Samhax. Then one day, twenty-odd years ago, while Andral was out at sea on a raid of his own, Samhax led a small band of his warriors to the peaceful, seaside village of Enyon'dre in search of slaves. Only young men were wanted. All others were killed. Including Andral's wife and child. It took Andral six years and much study in the darker arts, to exact revenge and finally kill Samhax. When he was finished, Andral claimed for himself the symbol of the Witch Lord's power. After that, he'd taken to drinking and brawling to forget. Until Ionas convinced him his skills might be put to better use.

Ionas heard the scream, the crack and the crash. He didn't need to see it. He could well imagine the mighty hammer striking the back of that last man and shattering it, driving him forward, its force not yet spent, into the wall or a table. He shook his head.

"They always have to run," Andral complained into the stillness. "I'm getting too old for this, Io." Reluctantly, he got up to retrieve his hammer.

Ionas laughed. "What are you complaining about, old man? If you didn't have to chase that hammer of yours, you'd never get any exercise." He stood and walked over to the men he'd killed. Stooping, he tugged his blades free from their heads, then wiped them clean on the nearest man's cloak. When he was finished, he returned to his barstool. The barkeep stared at him.

Ionas shrugged. "Now that we have some privacy, we can talk about—"

The biggest man Ionas had ever seen stepped through a door at the side of the bar.

"Well," Ionas said, rising to his feet, "aren't you the interesting one."

Ionas felt the wooden planks of the floor groan beneath his feet as the man approached. The muscles in the giant's arms and chest rippled in ocean-like waves as he moved, the huge veins standing out like hawsers. His mahogany skin, marred with a hundred scars and tattoos, glistened with a sheen of sweat in the tavern's weak torchlight, the tattoos on his right arm glowing a baleful blue.

"This is Abonsam Bacax," the barkeep said. "He makes sure things don't get . . . out of hand around here."

Ionas turned to Andral. He pointed at the giant with his thumb and mouthed, "He's really big."

Andral sighed and shook his head.

"You hit him first," Ionas whispered.

Andral shook his head again. Then he ground his large hands around his hammer and stepped forward.

The barkeep raised his hand. "No, it's all right, Abonsam."

The giant looked around at the dead bodies. He turned to Ionas.

Ionas flashed a smile. "They started it," he said.

Abonsam looked to the barkeep. The old man nodded. With a final glance at Ionas and Andral, Abonsam returned to the back room.

When the door was closed, the barkeep said, "Now, what did you want to talk about?"

"Well, Kyllian," Ionas said, "we've been told you have some information that might be of interest to us." If the old man was surprised by the use of his name, he did not show it.

Andral took a seat beside Ionas, and laid his bloody hammer atop the bar.

The barkeep turned to Andral. "Anything's possible, I suppose."

Ionas shook his head. "We have come seeking knowledge of Naga Apalla, and we were told you could be of some assistance in the matter."

The barkeep scoffed and spit sprayed from between his gapped teeth. "The Graveyard of Wyrms? Nothing secret about that. Everything you need to know about Naga Apalla's already been written in books. In the eight hundred years since the wyrms were destroyed, more people have visited that place than probably any place in the known world. Lots of folks died up there, and not one of them ever found anything worth looking for."

With quiet menace, Andral said, "They were not us."

The barkeep's gaze flitted between them. "No," he said slowly, backing away from the bar, "guess they weren't. Still not sure how I can –"

Ionas reached over the bar and dragged the old man across the top. He clamped his hand tightly over the barkeep's mouth and hissed in his ear. "If you scream, your pet giant will hear you. It would do you precious little good however, because you would not be alive to see his arrival. Do we understand one another?"

In Ionas' grasp, the old man nodded. "Good. There is a map, lame one, a map that shows the one true path to the treasure chamber in Naga Apalla. We have searched for that map for . . . a long time. We have followed a long and winding trail that has led us here. To you. It would be . . . wise of you to aid us in any way you can. Now, lest you think us uncivil, know that we are not averse to paying handsomely for whatever help you can give us. But, please, do not try our patience in this matter. Giant or no giant, I assure you, it would not be in your best interest."

The old man's eyes began to bulge as he struggled for breath. Ionas held him for a moment longer, the old man's weathered face ballooning into a crimson mass, before he released him.

The barkeep coughed and gasped as he struggled to regain his feet.

"So?" Andral asked.

The old man massaged his throat as he stared at the two men. "I do not have the map," he croaked.

Ionas stood, two daggers suddenly in his right hand.

The barkeep raised his hands. "I swear I speak the truth! But I know who does. Sit, and I will tell you all I know."

Ionas did sit then, and he and Andral listened as the barkeep told them almost everything he knew.

* * *

Ionas and Andral rode for four days through an endless drizzle before they finally saw the towering walls of Sunden. The scorched remains of the city's ancient stone walls loomed before them, the archway of the enormous main gate having long ago fallen to the ground in a shattered heap. High above the pile of burnt and broken stone, a charred shutter creaked in the window of the wall's only remaining tower. Beside them, staked into the side of the muddy trail, a crooked wooden sign read: No Trespassers.

Staring through the chilling mist at the remains of the once thriving city, Ionas hitched up his black cloak.

"Not much to look at," he said, his courser shifting beneath him.

"Umph."

"Now, don't be like that. Just think: if the old man was telling the truth, the richest prize in all the world is waiting for us in that little town."

"And if he wasn't?"

Ionas turned to Andral and smiled.

"Right," Andral said. "That might be more fun than finding the map."

Then, with the sun beginning to set in the gray sky, the two men made their way over the muck and mire trail, toward the dead city of Sunden.

* * *

Carefully, their mounts picked their way over the slick stone and scree that was all that remained of the once towering entrance to the city.

"What happened here?" Ionas asked, his words hushed. His tone conveyed none of its usual levity.

Andral glanced at Ionas through the folds of his drooping hood; saw him fingering the hilts of his daggers. "A wyrm," Andral said into the stark quiet the sepulchral city imposed. "After the hunting began, the wyrms grew . . . angry. As they headed north, to Naga Apalla and the final battle, the beasts destroyed many cities like this one. A small enough revenge for the inevitable destruction of their race." Andral shrugged. "There are even some who believe it was the wyrms who begat the Plague."

Listening to his friend's words, Ionas stared through the thick gloom at the charred remains of the once proud city.

The large fountain that once dominated the entryway beyond the gate was a crumbling pile of blackened stone. Beyond the fountain, a broken pile of rubble existed where the once thriving market square would have stood. Everywhere Ionas looked, the destruction was absolute and total. As his narrowed gaze lingered on the decimated city, for the first time in a long, long while, Ionas dan Ayre was afraid.

Though he had never seen one of the legendary beasts—no living man ever had—Ionas found he could imagine one easily enough. In his mind's eye he watched the beast soar through the air, its massive, scaled body and great, serpentine wings casting the city into darkness and shadow. He could see the rays of the sun glinting off the armored plates of its impenetrable hide, hear the roar that would have shaken the city to its foundations. Ionas could feel the heat and smell the boiling flesh and stone as fire and magic and hatred erupted from the beast's enormous, toothy maw. In his saddle, Ionas shuddered.

"Yes," Andral said, his own words hushed, "it must have been quite a sight. Larger than any creature has ever been, immune to all but the strongest magicks. Even an entire city could not have stood long against the beast's full fury. Had there been more of them, things would have been different."

"The hunters must have been very great. Or very foolish."

"Both," Andral said. "The greatest of the hunters were, indeed, great. The strongest warriors and wizards in the world. It took many years of harsh training to become a true Hunter, and there were few schools. One of the finest schools in the world was here, in Sunden."

Ionas raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"It was the reason for the attack."

"The teachers, the students?"

"Not enough. It took many great hunters, working together, to bring down the larger wyrms, and, according to legend, the wyrm that destroyed Sunden was very large. It destroyed the school then turned its fury on the terrified city. By all accounts, no one survived."

"A pleasant tale. But, why was the city never rebuilt?"

"The same reason none of the fallen cities were ever rebuilt: the curse. It is said that once a wyrm destroys a place, it stays destroyed forever."

Ionas frowned.

"Some believe a portion of the beast's *uath*, its . . . spirit lingers like a haunt amid the ruins of whatever it destroys. And if any dare try to rebuild what a wyrm has sundered, the spirit is angered." Andral shrugged. "People believe many things."

Ionas peered through the gray mist. "The barkeep said the shantytown is north of the market square. Let's get what we came for and be done with this place. If the tales *are* true, best not to overstay our welcome."

Ionas and Andral carefully made their way into the slaughtered heart of the dead city.

* * *

The clop of iron on the ancient cobbled roads echoed through the tenebrous night. All around them, like burnt and tottering liches, the buildings watched them.

From the corner of Ionas' eye, a flash of darkness in the murk. The sound of running feet followed, then distant, fading laughter.

He turned to Andral.

Andral grunted. "They know we're here."

"Good," Ionas answered, shifting his cloak to free his daggers. "Then we won't have to find them."

Through the cloying mist, they rode on in silence.

* * *

Passing beyond the ruins of the market square, Ionas and Andral followed the meandering road north and east. The sky darkened with the deepening night, and the rain ended. In its place, a cool wind blew from the north and howled through the dark alleys and pitted buildings of Sunden. The *uath* of a wyrm? Ionas shivered and ducked his head against the damp chill. They continued to follow the broken road until it opened up into what once would have been a large grassy field.

"Well," Ionas muttered, "this must be the place."

"Hmm," Andral said. "A tournament field, perhaps?"

"Or the site of a bazaar?"

"Yes, very possible."

"Either way, a good place for this." In the shadow of the crumbling remains of the east wall, a small town had been erected. The muddy ground of the field was littered with dozens of tiny hovels. The teetering shacks sprung from the mire like swaying corpses. At the center of the shantytown, a group of derelict men and women huddled around a large fire.

Ionas sighed. If one looked hard enough, one could always find places like it. He knew if he were the type of person to ask questions, he might have wondered what had happened to these people, wondered where their lives had gone so wrong that they were left with . . . this. But, ever since that day, when he was six years old and his parents sold him to the guild for ten pieces of silver, Ionas did not ask questions. Instead, he muttered, "Apparently not everyone believes the legends." He glanced at Andral then flicked his leather reins.

"Or else they are all so desperate," Andral whispered, "they just don't care."

Together, the two men made their way toward the fire.

* * *

"We are looking for Callista," Ionas said over the crackle of the blaze. Stinking bodies and empty bottles lay strewn across the muddy ground all around the fire.

"What business have you here?"

Ionas and Andral wheeled. From the darkness, a man emerged. The man was tall, taller even than Ionas. His grimy beard, flecked with dirt and food and crawling things, hung down past his laboring chest, and did little to hide the wrinkled, emaciated flesh beneath it. The arched bones of the man's face were clearly visible through his sickly skin and gave Ionas the impression he was speaking to a skull. The man leaned on a crooked staff for support. His breath came in harsh gasps as he stared at Ionas.

Over the crackle-pop of the flames, Ionas smiled. "My good sir, we have traveled far in search of one who calls this place home. Her name is Callista."

The old man's eyes narrowed.

"If you can show us to her, we will certainly make it worth your while."

When the man did not answer, Ionas looked around and said, "Of course, any offer we might tender must surely pale in comparison to the everyday pleasures that surround you."

The old man glared at Ionas.

"Just tell us where she is, old man," Andral said. "It would be –"

Ionas saw Andral staring at the staff.

"Andral?"

"Rowan wood," Andral whispered. In less than an instant, Andral freed Agrona from his belt. "Magic."

As quick as Andral was, Ionas was faster. By the time Andral raised his hammer, three daggers sliced through the air toward the old man.

With a motion too quick for even Ionas to follow, he calmly parried the three blades. Startled, Ionas watched the daggers quietly sail into the suddenly violent night.

Ionas turned to Andral. "Uh-oh."

Andral shook his head and raised his hammer. Whirling it with both hands above his head, he screamed and let it fly.

The old man's eyes grew wide as the huge hammer bore down on him. Stepping back, he raised his staff and closed his eyes.

Hammer met staff and the collision shook the ground. Many of the nearby shacks were felled by the impact, and Ionas was thrown from his horse. He landed painfully amid the squelching muck of the field. With a groan, he fought to clear his head.

"Ionas!" Andral's warning brought the clarity Ionas needed, and he looked up in time to see two men rushing at him with wooden clubs. A flick of his wrist, and both men died with daggers in their hearts. Ionas watched the others around the fire turn and run. He shook his head, still dazed, then looked at the old man. He lay unmoving upon the ground, his staff across his chest. The staff was cracked at its center, but remained whole. The magicks that fashioned it were strong indeed to resist the power of Agrona. In front of the old man, Andral sat atop his horse staring down at Ionas.

"Well, do you plan on sitting there all night?"

Ionas shot his friend a withering glance. "No one to blame but yourself," he said, struggling to his feet and dripping mud. "Had you recognized the staff earlier, perhaps –"

The staff began to glow.

"Now what?" Ionas said, quickly regaining his horse.

"He's summoning," Andral said.

Two daggers penetrated the old man's forehead before Andral finished his sentence. The glow of the staff receded.

"Was summoning," Ionas said.

"Hmm," Andral said, climbing from his horse to retrieve his hammer. As he reached it, the night reverberated with growls. "Did summon," he said.

Then the night came to snarling life. From the flickering shadows of the wall, two huge wolves emerged. They glared savage hatred at Ionas and Andral, and charged. Ionas watched Andral raise his hammer and smash the skull of one as it leaped for his throat. The mighty warrior caught and gripped the second by the throat with a hand that could crush stone. The beast snapped and clawed at Andral, then howled in pain and impotent rage.

"Filthy animal," Andral spat as blood welled from a deep gash in his arm. He brought his hammer down and the beast died.

Behind Andral, two more wolves died with daggers in their eyes as they rushed for Ionas. But from the shadowy recesses of the walls, four more of the slavering beasts emerged to take their places.

"This might be a problem," Ionas said quietly, as the wolves cautiously approached him from out of the darkness.

He heard Andral cast his wolf aside. "Could be," he said.

Ionas drew three more daggers, the last of them, and readied to release when a voice cried out, "Enough! Please, no more killing. They only seek to protect us."

Ionas turned to see a young woman—no more than eighteen, surely, though Ionas suspected her shadowed eyes had seen a great deal in those eighteen years—dressed in rags. She was small and filthy and deathly thin, but even so, Ionas could see that at one time, she had been beautiful.

At the sound of her voice, the remaining wolves stopped, and slunk back into the shadows.

Ionas sheathed his daggers. "Callista?"

The young woman nodded. "Why have you come?"

"For the map," Andral said, walking back to his horse.

Callista stared at him. "Of course you have. But, I wonder, how did you –" Callista's eyes narrowed. "Kyllian," she whispered.

Neither man spoke.

"It matters little how we found you," Andral said at length, regaining his saddle. "We have. Now give us the map, and we shall take our leave. Please, do not resist."

Ionas glanced at Andral's hammer, then back at Callista. "He did ask politely," he said.

Callista held Ionas' gaze for a moment, then reached for the pouch at her side.

Ionas withdrew a dagger. "Slowly," he warned.

The young woman smiled. Slowly, she reached into her pouch and pulled out a folded piece of parchment. She held it up before them. "Is this what you want?"

Ionas glared her.

"Then here," she said, waving it over her head.

Leery, one hand on the reins, the other stroking the hilts of his daggers, Ionas urged his mount forward. When he was beside the girl, he reached down and took the map from her hand.

"You are too kind," Ionas said.

If she understood his sarcasm, it didn't show. Callista shrugged as Ionas unfolded the map. After studying it for a moment, he turned to the girl and raised his dagger. Ionas turned the blade slowly, letting the harsh light of the flickering blaze play along its lethal edge. "You were warned, girl," he whispered, "not to play with us. This is the last time I will ask: where is the map?"

Andral rode up beside him. He reached over and took the map. After looking it over in silence for a moment, he said, "Hmph. Clever wench." He handed it back to Ionas. "It is spelled."

"Spelled?"

"Spelled," Callista said.

"By all the demons in Hell," Ionas grumbled. "Spelled."

"Take it if you'd like," Callista said, "but I'm the only one who can read it."

Ionas turned to Andral. "So?"

Andral turned to the girl. "So?"

"So? So, now you take me with you, we find the treasure, and split it evenly three ways. That's 'so'."

Ionas ran his hand the length of his face and groaned. "Naturally," he muttered.

"But first . . ." Callista looked up at Andral. "You must swear upon your weapon that no harm shall befall me, before or after we find the treasure. You must also swear to split the treasure with me, evenly."

"Girl," Andral growled, leaning menacingly toward her, "you sorely test my –"

"Or, you could always kill me, take the map, and try to find the treasure yourselves. The choice, of course, is yours."

Ionas and Andral stared at one another. Then Ionas nodded.

"Oh, very well," Andral said. "Upon the forged heart of Agrona, I swear it shall be as you have spoken."

The girl nodded.

"Great," Ionas said. "Can we go now?" He reached down, took the girl's filthy hand and helped her to a seat behind him. She held snugly to his waist as they turned from the camp, and made their way, at long last, toward Naga Apalla and the greatest treasure in the world.

* * *

Ionas half-turned to Callista. "Well?" he said, over the jangle of reins. Behind them, the crumbling walls of Sunden were swallowed by the gray mist.

"Well what?" the girl asked.

"Well, are you going to tell us how you came into possession of the map? How a girl who holds the key to the world's greatest treasure, is living in the world's greatest dungheap? Who that crazy old man with the staff was? Something? Anything?"

"Oh," Callista said, "that."

Ionas shook his head.

"Hmm, let's see. One, I stole the map. Two, I was hiding. Three, he was a crazy old man with a staff."

Ionas and Andral exchanged glances.

"What? You think because I'm a girl I can't be a thief, steal a *carnotha*? Please. If you're not careful, maybe one day I'll steal yours."

"Careful, girl . . ." Ionas murmured.

Callista went on as though he had not spoken. "Anyway, getting the map was easy. A good-looking guy, a busy street. He was walking out of a library, hands full of books. He had a gorgeous cloak, expensive boots, could obviously read." Callista shrugged. "I figured he had to be rich. I followed him for a ways, became real interested when I saw the size of the purse at his waist. A little while later, I arranged to 'bump' into him."

"A pickpocket. Figures."

Callista slapped Ionas on the back. "A girl's got to make a living somehow," she said. "And it was better than the alternative."

Ionas thought of the streetwalkers he knew. "Point taken," he conceded. "But that still doesn't explain –"

"The map was in the purse," Andral said.

Ionas turned to see Callista nod. "Along with a couple silver pieces. When I opened the map, I had no idea what it was. I was so angry I almost ripped it up. Before I did though, I thought it might at least be worth checking out. I took it to my Guildmaster, but even he didn't recognize it. He was more interested in the silver anyway. He did give me a name though, of a man, a sorcerer, who might be able to help me. I brought him the map. Should have seen his face when he looked at it. He told me all about it, about the legends and the treasure. He even offered to help me find it. I figured if half of what the guy told me about the treasure was

true, even if I agreed to split it, there would be more than enough to last me my lifetime. And if anyone could help me find it, it would be a sorcerer. So I agreed and had him spell the map so only we could read it. Free of charge, of course. I figured it was the least he could do. Then he told me to gather my things and come back in the morning." Callista paused.

"And?" Ionas asked.

"And the next morning he was dead."

"The man wanted his map back," Andral said.

"Yes. He even had a couple goons watching the sorcerer's home. Damn near caught me too, but I managed to get away. Been hiding in Sunden ever since."

"What of the barkeep who told us about you in the first place?" Andral asked.

"Kyllian. People say a long time ago, he was the best thief in the world. I believe them. He taught me everything I know. He's also my best friend. I told him to keep his ears open for the Librarian. I also told him if he came across anyone he thought might help me find the treasure, to send them my way. For some reason, I guess he thought you two were good enough to get the job done. Anyway, once I find that gold, I'll be so rich I won't have to be afraid of anyone ever again."

"Hmph," Ionas said. "Why not just go after it yourself?"

Ionas felt Callista shrug. "There are many written instructions on the map. And I can't read."

Ionas stopped his horse. He turned around and stared at the girl. "Let me understand," he said slowly, as Andral came up beside them. "You can't read the map, and the map is spelled so that no one else can read it either?" He turned to Andral. "Am I the only one who sees a problem here?"

Andral's eyes hardened as he stared at the girl.

Callista smiled. "It's true that I can't read the map. It's also true that no one else can, either. Which is why," she said, reaching back into her pouch, "I drew a second copy of the map, identical to the original, minus the spell."

Ionas felt a smile, like a spider, skitter across his face. "After a month in a bath, a pile of new clothes and a hair cut, you could really be my kind of girl."

Even in the darkness, Ionas saw Callista blush.

"Clever, girl," Andral said. "May I?"

Callista stared at Andral. "Remember your word," she said.

Andral nodded as Callista handed him the copy of the map. In the diffused moonlight, Andral studied the crude drawing. When he was finished, he folded it up and put it in his pouch.

"So?" Ionas asked.

"So, let's find the treasure."

* * *

It had been a four-day ride to reach the pass that led up the jagged slopes of Naga Apalla. Clouds flitted across the early morning sky, and in the stark sunlight the mountain towered before them like a splintered bone. With only a little effort, Ionas could imagine the roar of flapping wings, could see the great beasts circling the mountaintop.

"We're sure all the beasts are dead," he said, "right?"

Andral laughed. "Quite sure."

"But what about the stories?" Callista asked, holding more tightly to Ionas' waist. "Some people believe not all the Dragons were killed on Naga Apalla, that there are some still alive out there, that perhaps the priests of Seitherell saved them and imprisoned them up there for their own unholy purposes." Ionas heard Callista gulp. "And what about all the people killed on the mountain?"

"Bah! Myths," Andral scoffed. "Fabrications made up by the priests or others to keep people away from the mountain. And the treasure. Think, both of you. If a Dragon were alive today, what would it eat, how could it survive? There is little to feed a Dragon on the mountain, it would have to come down sometime, or starve. By all accounts, a Dragon was not a small, quiet creature. Where would it live? Any Dragon would have been noticed and hunted down long ago. Have you any idea the worth of a wyrm's hide today? Incalculable. As for the deaths: any mountain is treacherous, Naga Apalla more so than most. And if the treasure is as great as it is said to be, I suspect certain . . . precautions, have been set to ensure that it remains where it is hidden."

"Traps," Ionas said.

Andral nodded. "With luck, the map should guide us through them."

"How far to the entrance?"

Andral pulled out the map. "According to this, there is a secret entrance a few miles up the pass." Andral looked upward. The rocky pass was steep and meandered around huge boulders and jagged pieces of stone. "We should reach it in a couple of hours."

Ionas nodded. "Then, what are we waiting for?"

And they began their trek up the mountain.

* * *

"Well," said Andral. "There it is."

"There what is?" Ionas asked.

"The entrance."

Ionas turned to Callista. Callista shrugged.

"Umm, it's a wall, Andral. A very tall, very sheer wall." And it was. They had followed the scree and gravel trail for nearly three hours, winding their way up the steep, windblown northern face of Naga Apalla. The path continued to climb before them, but Andral had stopped at the base of a towering sheet of rock. The wall climbed several hundred feet, and stretched out of sight in both directions.

"True," Andral said. "But, nonetheless . . ." Andral climbed down from his horse and approached the wall. He turned to Callista. "You copied this exactly?"

Ionas wasn't sure, because frankly he had never heard it before, but he thought he detected a tiny hint of fear in Andral's voice.

The girl nodded.

Andral drew a breath. "Let's hope so." Walking to the wall, he drew a strange, intricate figure upon the face of the rock. As he finished, the character began to glow.

"Gods of Hell," he said, stepping away from the pulsing script. "It is true. Dragon Scrawl."

As though Andral had scribed it with acid, the ancient character hissed and burned on the wall, changing from green to blue, to purple. And as it burned, the mountain trembled.

"Andral?" Ionas asked.

The character dissolved, like powder in the wind, and the wall vanished. In its place was a gaping hole large enough to swallow the entire city of Sunden.

Ionas wanted to speak, but he could not find the words. He turned to Andral. Andral stared at the entrance, stunned by its magnitude. Ionas knew nothing else like it existed in all of the world.

"Wow," Callista said.

"Yes," Ionas answered. "Wow."

"I have read the stories," Andral whispered, "seen drawings. I have learned all there is to know of the great beasts. But, this . . ." Andral shook his head in awe. "Their majesty, their power, it must have beggared description." Andral folded the map and regained his mount. He turned to Ionas. "Imagine the secrets buried within, the power."

"The treasure," Ionas finished, his eyes aglow.

"The treasure," Andral echoed. The two men stared at each other. They smiled. Then, together, they urged their mounts forward and entered the legendary cavern of the wyrms.

* * *

The darkness beyond the small circle of light given off by their torch was stifling, and the weight of the mountain threatened to crush their courage beneath it. They had traveled only a short while, but already the cavern was sloping steeply into the earth, swallowing whatever light dared enter its primeval confines.

"Hmm, it's pretty dark down here," Ionas said, his heart pounding in his chest. They listened to his last words echo into the vast gloom before anyone spoke.

"Yes," Callista whispered. As quietly as she spoke, her word, too, echoed.

Andral grunted and pulled out the map. "According to this, we shouldn't be far from where a second passageway meets this one." Andral folded the map and stared ahead into the impenetrable murk.

"I have a question," Callista said.

Andral turned to her.

"Well, if we do find this treasure, how are we going to carry it? I mean it's not like we have a cart or anything."

"My, aren't we the observant one," Ionas said, shaking his head.

"We have a couple bags stored in our packs," Andral answered. "They'll hold enough to start. Don't forget, we don't want to make things too obvious. Cartfuls of treasure tend to be difficult to hide, and even more difficult to explain. We'll still be the only ones who know where the treasure is, so we can come back for more any time we choose. Now, can we go?"

Callista nodded—a little sheepishly—and they set off. A few moments later they came upon the passage. Only slightly smaller than the one they were in, it wound steeply down in a sharp spiral. After that, they followed a seemingly endless maze of tunnels and caverns, all indescribably vast, all indescribably dark. They walked for hours, burning torch after torch, stopping only briefly for food and water. The temperature, as they trekked into the earth's ancient recesses, dropped until they huddled around the dwindling flame of the last of their torches like moths. When they reached the edge of a strangely tiled floor, they were almost too exhausted to notice.

"Stop!" Andral cried.

They did. Directly in front of them, the smooth rock floor of the tunnel was replaced by a mosaic cast in stone slabs. Each stone was engraved with its own intricate design. Beyond the tiled floor, at the edge of the torch's fading light, was a set of doors.

"Those are the biggest doors I've ever seen," Ionas whispered.

"The biggest anyone has ever seen," Andral said.

The doors were staggering. As large as the hole through which they had entered the mountain, the tops of the twin doors were lost in darkness. In the shadow-orange glow of the flames, it was difficult to name the metal the doors were fashioned from. Ionas thought it might be bronze, but he was too far away yet, to be certain.

The image of a huge wyrm was etched at the very center of the ominous doors, and far above, from the occluding gloom where their torchlight could not touch, twin flashes of brilliant, ruby red gleamed.

"The eyes," Ionas whispered, fascinated. "Those rubies must be . . ."

"Yes. At least the size of three men."

Ionas whistled. On either side of the colossal doors, a cold brazier rested. Each of the massive sconces stood as tall as a dozen men. Images were graven in their iron sides, but Ionas could not make them out.

"So, what are we waiting for?" Callista made to take a step but before her foot dropped onto the first tile, Andral grabbed her arm and pulled her back. "What the –"

"A trap," Andral said.

Ionas stared at her. "Obvious, I would have thought, for a thief."

"A pickpocket," Callista corrected, as she stared at the floor. "You don't run across much magic on the streets."

"Yes, of course," Andral said. "According to the map, the designs with corners are the safe ones. Step on a rounded design, and I suspect the trip will be ended; for all of us."

Ionas nodded. "And we'd better hurry," he said, staring at the torch. "We don't have much light left." He turned to Callista. Armed with his most charming smile, Ionas bowed with a flourish and said, "Ladies first."

Callista glared at him and stepped onto the first stone. Then, one after the other and as quickly as they could, they took turns leaping from stone to stone, and began to cross the deadly floor.

They were nearly on the other side when their makeshift torch sputtered for a final time, and went out. The resulting darkness was suffocating. For a long while, no one spoke.

"Well," Ionas said, "isn't this just great."

"Quite," Andral said.

"I was looking ahead while I stepped," Callista whispered. Her hushed voice echoed from the darkness. "I think I know the way."

"You think you know the way? You best do more than 'think'."

"How sure are you, girl?" Andral asked.

"Pretty sure."

"Great," Ionas said. "This gets better and better."

"Have you a better idea?" Callista shot back.

Ionas sighed. "It will be a pity, dying so close to being the richest man in the world."

"Think, Callista," Andral urged. "Remember exactly what you saw. Place that image in your mind. Remember what it felt like to step, the stretch of your legs. The stones are

important, but you must also cover the right amount of space with each step."

"And just what is she to do once she reaches the other side?"

"I'll worry about that if I get there," Callista answered.

Somewhere in the darkness ahead of him, Ionas heard her take a breath. "All right," she said. "I'm ready. Wish me luck."

"Luck."

"Luck."

Ionas heard her take her first step. Inwardly, he cringed. He could not begin to imagine the consequences of triggering a trap set in place by a Dragon. But he was fairly certain he would be unlikely to live through the experience. He listened as she took her next step, and her next, her quiet footfalls cascading in a series of echoes. Soon, Ionas could not tell her real footfalls from their mimicking reverberations.

"I'm across," she called.

Ionas let out a long breath he had been unaware he was holding.

"Well done, girl," Andral said.

"Now what?" Ionas asked.

"Well," Callista said, "let's see what happens when I touch –"

The chamber burst into blinding, glorious light as the first of the braziers erupted to life with force enough to set the cavern trembling.

"Lords of Paradise," Andral whispered.

"Oh my word," Ionas said.

"Ouch," Callista groaned. Ionas watched her pull herself up from the ground and brush herself off. "Hmph. I certainly didn't expect that."

As quickly as they could, Ionas and Andral made their way across the lethal floor.

When they all stood beneath the blistering heat and light of the enormous sconce, Andral said, "What did you do?"

Callista shrugged. "I just touched it. If you want, I'll show –"

"Gods, girl," Andral said, "are you mad? The heat of this one brazier alone will be our death if we do not find a way inside the doors quickly."

"Very quickly," Ionas added. Already sweat streaked his forehead, meandered down his back, gathered in private places he would have preferred it not gather.

"But how?" Callista asked.

Andral stared at the doors for a long moment. "Hmm." Slowly, he reached forward and laid his hand upon the metal. "Cold," he said.

Callista turned to Ionas. He shrugged. "So?" she said.

"Not just cold, icy cold."

Ionas stared at his friend. "And . . .?"

"Wait!" Andral cried, his words reflecting through the vast chamber. "Ruby eyes, icy cold . . . There is a legend, a very old one, that spoke of the first of the great beasts. He came in answer to the cries of the gods who, in their supreme arrogance, had set free the terrible monster, Kung Kung, whose destiny it was to end the Universe in all-consuming fire. The first of the Dragons was fashioned from the hopes and dreams of all the gods, and given life by their desperation." Andral stepped back, stared up at the towering image of the wyrm. "The beast was given eyes of ruby to help him see through the hottest flame, and a heart of ice to combat Kung Kung's insatiable fire."

Andral turned to Ionas. "After a battle unlike any ever waged, the King of the Wyrms vanquished Kung Kung, and sealed him in a mountain of ice, forever."

Ionas smiled.

"The king's name was, Haoxian."

And with that, the invincible doors swung wide.

* * *

The sight that awaited them stole their breath. Ionas turned a disbelieving gaze on Andral. Andral did not notice.

The sheer volume of the treasure scattered throughout the city-sized chamber was staggering. Ionas did not know where to look first. Mountains of gold were piled so high, that even amid the light of the ten, perhaps twenty thousand huge candles that burst to life with the opening of the doors, Ionas could not see their peaks. Jewels the size of horses and gems the size of carts were mingled with silver and platinum in piles that faded into the distance. Enough treasure—were it ever brought to light all at once—to decimate the economic systems that operated throughout the world. But not everything was a precious metal or stone. Swords and shields and suits of armor were cast about like children's toys. Even Ionas could not help but feel it. The chamber seemed to thrum with a life of its own.

"It is . . ."

"Yes," Ionas said, while his friend sought for words. Slowly, he bent down, scooped up a handful of gold. With a smile, he let it fall through his fingers, tinkling to the ground. "And it's real."

Ionas watched Andral walk over to a mountain of gold. He reached in, and withdrew a beautifully wrought staff. Ionas saw a look of wonder pass over Andral's face. "Io, this is a Hunter's weapon. Do you understand? This chamber, it is the answer to all the secrets in all the world. The knowledge it contains, the power . . . it is . . . unspeakable."

"It certainly is," Callista said. And at her words, the doors swung shut behind her.

To his credit, Ionas did not hesitate. Instincts, honed a thousand times over the course of a dangerous life, triggered like lightning. Almost before the doors were fully sealed, Ionas wheeled. He had not finished his turn and two daggers were in the air, cast with the force of unleashed arrows.

With a casual wave of her left hand, Callista scattered them across the vast expanse of the treasure chamber.

The third one struck her full in the chest. The resulting clang was loud enough to cause pain, as the dagger ricocheted harmlessly off her, to land carelessly amid a mountain of gold.

Callista stared at Ionas. "Well done," she said.

Mouth hanging open, Ionas took a single step back. "What –"

Ionas saw Andral release his Agrona from the corner of his eye, saw it explode from his friend's hand like a thunderbolt. He saw Callista turn, and saw her predator's smile.

He watched in horror as she opened her mouth and spat gilded fire at the approaching weapon, destroying it utterly.

Andral, staggered, turning to Ionas.

"Are you quite through, Callista?"

A fourth voice cut through the chamber's surreality.

"Just having some fun, Kyllian," Callista said.

Ionas turned. From behind a mountain of gold, the old barkeep limped into view. A death's head grin split his weathered face. His teeth were as sharp as knives.

"This," Andral stammered, "this is madness."

Ionas watched his friend turn back and forth, from one to the other.

"Not madness," Callista said.

"Survival," Kyllian finished.

Callista cast her pewter gaze on Andral. She smiled. "What, no words? No revelations from the one who seemed to know so much? Tsk, tsk. Were you as wise as you believed yourself to be, you might have understood from the very beginning." She turned to face Andral. As she did, Ionas saw her shadow, vast and winged, crawl across the walls and floor of the chamber.

"How could a wyrm survive today?" she taunted, her voice a perfect imitation of Andral's. "What would it eat? Where would it live?" She took a graceful step toward the reeling warrior. "First off, let us suppose for a moment, that certain groups of humans have always worshiped Dragons, have always helped and protected them. Have always kept their secrets."

Ionas thought back to the people of Sunden, to the old man and his staff. If he lived through this, he promised himself he would start asking those questions he had always ignored.

"Next," Callista continued, "let us suppose that Dragons have the power to change their shape, to become anything they wish to be. Let us also suppose that, as wise as they are said to be, Dragons are able to lure unsuspecting treasure hunters into the depths of forbidden caverns. And lastly, with all of this, with their human servants, with their power to blend in, to feed, let us suppose that Dragons live all around you, in the places you fear, in the alleys and broken places where it is easy to find a home."

Andral, quivering at the sight of something Ionas was unable to see, collapsed to his knees, the Hunter's weapon falling from his feeble grasp. Callista walked up to him, slowly. She ran a long finger beneath his bearded chin, and raised his head up to meet her hidden gaze.

"Then," she said slowly, "then not only might Dragons survive, they might thrive." Her finger traced its way down Andral's throat. Ionas heard his friend whimper. He moved to reach for a dagger, but Callista turned to him. The sight of her ebony gaze froze him in his place. Helpless, he watched as her small hand began to change. Slowly at first, then more quickly, her fingers began to stretch. The knuckles became knobbed, and black scales, like leprosy, began to cover them. Her nails too, elongated, until she held Andral effortlessly before her in a single midnight talon.

Callista laughed. As she did, her neck began to stretch, her head and face began to change. This time it was Ionas who whimpered, as Callista's head shifted and distended until it was replaced by the enormous head of a coal black Dragon. For a moment, the serpentine head wove back and forth, the movement disturbingly graceful, sinuous.

Then, like lightning, the head snapped forward, the jaws clamped shut and Andral died.

Ionas collapsed to his knees as he watched Andral being devoured.

"Don't worry," Kyllian said from behind him, "your friend won't be alone long. I've been so looking forward to seeing you again."

The last thing Ionas dan Ayre ever saw in this lifetime was an undulating shadow with teeth as white as the softest cloud.

He never even had time to scream.

* * *

"I am telling you, Kurtz, the treasure is there. It has to be."

Kurtz shook his head. "I don't know, Lonnrot, I've heard a lot of bad things about that mountain."

"Mountain?" the aged barkeep asked from behind the bar. "Did you say mountain?"

The two men looked up from their drinks to meet the rheumy green gaze of the crippled old man.

"Do you know something of the treasure of Naga Apalla?" Kurtz whispered, his eyes gleaming in the weak torchlight of the Glittering Hoard.

"Hmm," said Kyllian, "perhaps. Come closer, and I shall tell you all I know."

And the two men did come closer, and they sat and listened as Kyllian told them almost everything he knew . . .

The End

Scott is an elementary school teacher from Windsor, ON., who has taught all grade levels from elementary school through universtity. He is also a contributing editor to Deep Magic who lives at home with his wife (oh, yes, sorry) WONDERFUL wife and two beautiful daughters.

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bounty had selected Polod's great desert, a place that was nothing but scorching sand and sun-baked mountains. The *Shard* had landed in its far northern area. Further south, it was so hot from volcanic activity that sand became glass and nothing could live. It would be a dangerous job. The natives had well developed and practiced cultures that tended toward brutality. Off-worlders had landed on Polod before and done some trade, but they were distrusted and even hated. Fierce animals roamed the desert. It was almost the opposite of Allaua in every way—and that, along with the high pay, was why I had taken the job.

Axten sealed up the *Flint Shard*, so that no animals or natives could get inside, and we set off together. I was glad for my boots within minutes—the sand and rocks were searing hot. I had to put on gloves to climb them. Axten had good cooling systems, enhanced for this job.

We reached the top of the crags and looked out onto a massive expanse of wavy sand, pale yellow in color. Here and there were formations of red stone, like the one that now contained the *Flint Shard*. According to Axten, Hiblon's ship had set down behind one of them. We started walking. It was good to feel my pistols and dagger at my sides after the time on Allaua.

It was only half a kilometer, but it seemed long. The sun was hot and my vest and pants were both dark. I dug my sun goggles out of my vest pocket and put them on to protect myself from the sand's glare.

I saw the bulk of the ship shimmering in the sun, hidden in the shadow of a tall stone tor. I couldn't distinguish their heat from that of the sand and the air, but I could see the bikes unloaded. Hiblon and Nolthel had disembarked. A minute later, and I could make out details through the heat blur. Nolthel, marked by his dark gray skin, was bending over one of the bikes. Hiblon, as pallid white as Nolthel was gray, sat on the ramp, wiping the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief. He was a lean man, tall and long faced. He looked up at Axten and me as we drew near. "You have everything you need, Flinteye?"

"We do."

"Then pick a bike and load it up. I'm taking the red one."

He kept looking at me as I turned away, no doubt eyeing my leonine body, claws, short golden fur, and head that was somewhere between canine and feline with the ears removed and black orbs for eyes. We had never met before his boss had arranged this job, and he seemed to be confirming that I really was Jalazar Flinteye.

But Nolthel—I had met him before. He was standing in front of the four airbikes Hiblon had brought for us. Expensive, but our employer was rich. Nolthel thrust out a finger as we approached. "That one is mine," he said, indicating one with dark yellow finish on its frame. "You and your machine may take the others."

I didn't contest that, although it was the best of them. Nolthel wasn't one to be contradicted if it could be avoided. His skin was so blankly gray that it shimmered, with a face that was human-like except for having slits in place of a nose and blank silver eyes. A crest of skin with supporting bone structure topped his head, and his fingers were long. He was a deadly killer—even I wasn't sure if I could take him. He was wearing his favored weapon, a blade thrower, along with a heavy, curved dagger. Other weapons, including a plasma caribine, were already loaded onto his chosen bike.

I nodded to him and let him gaze hatefully at Axten as we picked our bikes. It wasn't just mine—Nolthel hated every 'bot. But Axten angered him in particular. The last time we had met, on a group job, Nolthel had come close to ripping Axten's power core out of his chest with that dagger. Only Axten's fighting skill and my help had prevented that from happening, but it had been much too close for my peace of mind. We'd have to watch him carefully.

I picked my bike, one with a slightly slower engine than Nolthel's, but better steering. The controls and seat fit me well. Axten took the one remaining—probably the worst of them, but he didn't complain. I stowed some of my food and other travel items on it—all on top of the spare fuel canisters—along with my spare weapons, but kept my pistols, dagger, and some rations. When we were ready, Hiblon sealed up his ship and came over to us.

"Right. Nolthel, Flinteye, Axten. We're here to get a man named Eliron, who stole over 500,000 SEUs from my boss. The money has been recovered, but the thief has not. The last place we had news of him was from a village about a hundred kilometers south of here. You have translators?"

I did. They didn't work very well, especially when accents and dialects came into play, and were fiendishly expensive. But not many of the natives knew standard, and we had a rich man paying our costs—the same one who obtained the airbikes. Axten had some knowledge of languages, but he wasn't like most 'bots—I couldn't just insert a module into his core and suddenly make him able to speak a new one.

We all said yes, and Hiblon continued, "We'll ask after him there, and keep going until we can either capture him alive or bring back proof of his death. If living, he will be tried by the proper authorities for his crimes. You'll get paid either way. Understand?"

The three of us nodded. Hiblon mounted his picked red bike, settling his slim form into the seat. I thought it looked much too big for him—which might have been the reason he picked it, and his skin was already caked with sweat. Mine wasn't much better, and Axten's cooling systems were going. Nolthel alone didn't seem to notice any abnormal temperature.

Then, we rode. Hiblon lifted his bike into the air, fired his engine, and was off. Nolthel, myself, and Axten followed. My bike roared smoothly as we formed into a rough line to avoid blasting each other with our wake. Sand sped beneath my feet. It had been a long while since I had ridden an airbike, and I had almost forgotten the joy that comes from dangerous speeds.

I was right where I wanted to be—between Nolthel and Axten. The gray-skinned assassin kept his eyes fixed straight ahead for the most part, but now and then they would move over to Axten, looking past me. I pretended not to notice. Let him glare—but if he made any move, I'd tear his throat out, or maybe hold him still while Axten performed the honors.

It took us a half-hour to reach the village. That was the beauty of airbikes; if you had an open space, you could go as fast as your engine could with little risk unless you fell off. Most joy riders didn't use open areas, though.

The place could barely even be called a village. It was just a cluster of houses made from stone bricks, nestled in the shadow of a large outcropping which looked like it would provide shade for most of the day. There were holes and caves in the rock, so I assumed that there were more dwellings there. Numerous plants grew around the place, things like trees formed from spongy moss.

Hiblon slowed his bike as we drew near. The rest of us did likewise, although Nolthel eased himself a bit ahead. He was steering with his knees, and his blade-thrower was in his hands. Hiblon looked at me and said, "Flinteye, be ready. These natives have some strange customs, and they don't tend to like off-worlders. Tell your 'bot."

Both of them seemed very reluctant to speak Axten's name. I turned to him, opened my mouth, and he said, "I heard."

He already had a slug pistol in his hand—easier to use in a pinch than his ion rifle. The village drew closer, and I found that there weren't any beings in it, at least not outside. "Hiding,

do you think?" I asked Axten.

"I can do many things, Jalazar, but reading minds isn't one of them."

His tone wasn't as light as it usually was—either he was nervous, or being within a decaparsec of Nolthel made him irritable. Maybe both.

Hiblon dropped his speed still further, almost to a crawl, and we fell in with him. "Go in slowly and quietly. Don't make any sudden moves. Try to keep your weapons inconspicuous, but have them ready to use."

My pistols would come out of their holsters easily. I left them there.

We stopped our bikes just outside the first cluster of brick huts. There was no one to be seen—fires smoking in the streets, and half-filled jugs of water sat by the well. It was dark among the trees, but there was no one there either. There was a light wind blowing across the desert, scattering bits of dust and grit.

"If they're this terrified of us, I don't see how we can get any information out of them," snarled Nolthel.

Hiblon silenced him with a glare and a wave of his hand. Then the pale white human raised his hands and called out through his translator. The stuff that came out the other end sounded almost like he was choking on gravel.

There was no response.

"Flinteye, Nolthel. Go in. Use your translators if you meet anyone. Tell them that our intentions are peaceful. Axten, you stay here and guard me."

I nodded. My hand was clasped over the butt of my right pistol as I walked forward. I hadn't brought my armor—the stuff was hard to ride in, hot, and we hadn't expected heavy combat. Now I wished I had it.

We reached the village square safely. Still no sight of anyone, although there were a lot of half-faded footprints in the dust. A piece of meat had been left roasting, and was slowly being scorched. I considered eating it, decided not to, and glanced at Nolthel. His wide silver eyes were carefully studying the huts.

I heard a scream, and a moment later something warm struck my back. Its weight bore me to the ground and I hit the dust. My fist swung behind me and contacted, smacking into flesh. There was a shriek. I threw another punch and leapt to my feet, throwing the thing off, and then turned to face it, drawing one of my pistols.

The being's skin was as black as my eyes—blacker, if that was possible—and more or less humanoid. Two deep yellow eyes gazed out from deep-set sockets ringed with small knobs of bone, and its head was shaved bald. The nose was round and squat, the mouth small and lined with faintly pointed teeth. Its body was a bit too small in proportion to its limbs, and overall it was a head and shoulders shorter than I was. The only clothing it wore consisted of a loincloth and a white band around its head. In its hand was what looked like a small axe made from bone.

I aimed my pistol at its head and placed my finger on the trigger. The being showed me its teeth, and I did likewise. Then, staring up the barrel, it seemed to realize what I was about to do, and all its courage disappeared. In a moment, it was at my feet howling, bowing its head and rasping out of the back of its throat. Nolthel had another one clutched in his long fingers, and he was grinning as he slowly squeezed its throat.

Hiblon came running up, with Axten close behind. "Nolthel! Drop him!" he barked. The assassin gave the black being one more squeeze, then let him drop to the ground. The thing's head had turned pale, and saliva had begun to dribble from its jaws. Its chest heaved.

Hiblon turned to the houses, while the two beings lay prostrate on the ground. His

translator was held up to his mouth, and he spoke into it. Words I could understand went in one end of the bulky device, garble came out of the other. "We do not intend the people of this village any harm. We have things to trade in return for news. We will do you no harm—my warriors have been stilled."

Then, in response to his summons, an entire crowd of the dark-skinned beings emerged from the surroundings— inside houses, behind walls, hidden among the trees. Males and females, young and old. Some of them wore headdresses and bracelets of bone, hide, and dyed wood. Others carried weapons: Axes, spears, atlatls, and bludgeons of bone and crudely shaped metal. There were at least a hundred of them—perhaps enough to kill one or two of us if they all attacked at once. Axten would probably survive—even those atlatls wouldn't do much good against his chromeel frame, and his motors were strong enough to tear them apart.

One came up to us, an older one with a series of hooked bones stretched over his face. A long staff of the spongy wood was in his hand, topped by a curved blade of carved obsidian.

Hiblon held the translator up to his mouth. Instantly, he recoiled, waving his weapon menacingly. Hiblon rolled his eyes just slightly and put the machine up to his pale lips. He said, "This thing will let me understand your words, chieftain. It will not do you harm."

The old one opened his eyes wide in surprise. Then slowly, he bent forward and gurgled into the translator. The machine's tinny voice spat, "Who are you?"

The chieftain leapt back, and other villagers shifted and murmured. I wondered what they'd do if I showed them how my pistol worked by emptying a few charges into the ground. The chieftain put an exaggerated expression of courage on his face and spoke into the translator once more. "Your warriors are strong, off-worlder. They have defeated two of my best men without a drop of blood lost. Have you come to offer their service to the Village of the High Rock? They are large and fierce."

The translator was able to pick up some of the eagerness in his tone. I showed him my fangs, and he cowered. Nolthel's frill expanded a little.

Hiblon spoke again, quickly. "No. These warriors are sworn to me. They are from far worlds, the mightiest to be found anywhere. They are not for you—these warriors could destroy your village if I ordered them to."

They recoiled in terror when they heard that, looking at Nolthel, Axten, and I with fresh horror. Axten leaned across and said in my ear, "We wouldn't have to destroy anything. I put an ion stream into the ground, and they'll run away and die of thirst before coming back."

Looking at the black-skinned natives surrounding us, I wouldn't have been surprised if they did.

Hiblon continued, "But we do have things that we want from the Village of the High Rock. I have a question for you: Has another off-worlder come to you within the last year?"

The message was spat out in the native language, and the chieftain listened carefully. He fell back to his own people, and called some of the more richly dressed ones over to him. They stood for some time, conferring in hushed tones. They seemed to reach a decision, and the old one returned. "We have seen such a one. I will tell you more only in payment for the blood of these villagers."

I was surprised to see that the two who had attacked Nolthel and I were still on the ground, kneeling and shaking slightly. I realized that their lives were forfeit—we had defeated them and had been expected to kill them.

Hiblon glanced at us and said, "Granted. The blood price will be paid in return for news of the off-worlder."

The two natives remained on the ground, but now they dared to look up with hope in their yellow eyes. The chieftain nodded, shook his scythe, and spoke into the translator. "He was here two hundred days ago, almost precisely. A caravan of traders came—our grove provides wood and fruit for us to give them in exchange for things—and the off-worlder went with them. He had a bag filled with things to pay us with for shelter and food, and a weapon like those your warriors have. The caravan took him away to the east. To my knowledge, they were bound for the land beyond the Io-losh."

Hiblon nodded. "Then the blood price is paid."

Crying out with happiness, the two on the ground shot to their feet and bolted away. Nolthel's attacker beat mine in getting back to his clan—probably because my weapons had been safely holstered, while Nolthel had been fondling his big knife all through Hiblon's conversation. Axten stood silent, metal arms crossed over his torso.

Hiblon nodded and thanked the chieftain through the translator. Then he switched it off and turned to us. "Alright, get back to the bikes. We've got a few hours before sunset—we can make a few hundred kilometers at least before then."

As we left the village, leaving behind a crowd of much relieved natives, I noticed that the meat above the fire was now completely blackened. I should have eaten it while I had the chance.

I enjoyed the ride, despite the fact that I became pretty hungry toward the end of it. We rode several meters apart, although I stayed close to Axten and kept my bike between his and Nolthel's. I didn't try to talk to Axten—I wouldn't be heard well over the roar of the bikes, and his mood hadn't improved. On the rare occasions when he moved his photo-receptors away from the ground in front of him, they crept over to Nolthel.

The terrain continued unvaried. Sometimes we saw herds of four legged mammals running over the desert, and once I spotted a solitary beast covered in dark chitin. A few avians flew overhead and crouched on the rock tors.

We made camp as the stars were coming out overhead. Hiblon had a heat lantern, and we used that instead of a fire to keep ourselves warm against the night wind. Our food, dried rations packed in foil, were eaten cold.

Nolthel smiled to himself and said, "You told me that the people of this world are brave and dangerous, Hiblon. And yet those at the village fawned before us, and the ones who attacked us could not have defeated us even with plasma rifles."

"They are not the average, let me assure you. The lands beyond and within the Io-losh are home to fierce peoples. The Village of the High Rock would be swept away before a small party of them. But the High Rock villagers are not entirely worthless. Their craftsmanship is valued by traders, and thus they are mostly left to themselves by the neighboring villages, many of which harbor stronger warriors."

Nolthel smirked. "Strong enough to defeat me?"

"If I had thought so, Nolthel, I wouldn't have hired any of you. Yes, I do think you could defeat enough of them to prove yourselves worthy in their eyes, even stripped of technological weaponry. But even with your guns, you could not defeat an entire tribe."

Axten and I listened, sitting a ways off. The sand was cool. He said to me, softly, "Jalazar, what do you think of this job?"

The question surprised me, and I needed a few seconds before I could give an answer. "I don't like to have Nolthel along any more than you do, but I don't see anything wrong with it.

The bikes will let us catch Eliron quickly."

"Who is our employer?"

"An Alliance official."

"And what is our target?"

I looked at his face, which didn't do me much good. He wasn't capable of displaying expression. "You know that as well as I do."

"Right. Embezzlement is a civil crime in the Alliance?"

"It is, yes."

"So why are we here instead of the Patrol?"

I looked over at Hiblon and Nolthel. They were still safely engaged in their conversation a few meters away. I turned back to Axten. "It could be that he doesn't want anyone to know about this. It might lead to a scandal against his office and his world."

"The Patrol doesn't blab with things like that, Jalazar. He doesn't want anyone to know, including the Patrol. That's why he hired us. We're just space scum."

I shrugged. "Maybe he's paranoid. A money scandal is all it takes to ruin a being. It's not that unusual for Alliances to hire us. Jablo, Klithe and Anax, Paulos...."

"Nolthel's got a worse reputation than we do, with a lot more bounties out for him. He's wanted for murder many times over on several planets. Our employer would know that."

I nodded slowly. "You're right. It is odd. But what should we do?" I gestured to Hiblon. "He owns the bikes. Without them, we're stranded in the desert. We can't quit."

Axten put a hand on his slug pistol. "Just keep your eyes open, Jalazar. How much sleep do you need?"

"My normal six hours would be best, but I can do with less."

"I'd say we've got eight hours until its light enough to ride. You can take five, I'll shut down for the other three."

"Right. Me first?"

"Yes. I'll wake you if Nolthel decides to try something against us."

I took off my vest, bundled it up below my head, and kicked out a trough in the sand. Then, with my blanket over me, I went to sleep.

Axten woke me almost precisely five hours after the moment I had dropped off. The heat lantern's light had been turned off, but it was still putting out warmth. Axten's photo-receptors glowed red in the darkness. "Have you slept well, Jalazar?" he whispered.

Five hours was pretty good. I wouldn't feel the loss of the sixth until late afternoon at least. I nodded and said, "I'll keep watch. Any movement from Nolthel?"

"No. He talked to Hiblon a little while and fell asleep shortly after you did."

Axten shut himself off then, to give his power core some time to recharge. Sitting still did it somewhat, but it was best for him to switch off for a few hours a day. Nolthel's heat signature was safely motionless, as was Hiblon's.

The night was lit up by a sweep of glimmering stars. Polod had only one small moon, and it wasn't visible at this time of night. A cool breeze blew across the desert, just strong enough to shift the sand around and ripple through my short fur. Polod was a beautiful place, both by day and by night—although I preferred the night. I could see stars, the stars where I had made my home for my entire life.

I came back to full alertness when Nolthel's heat signature began to shift. He squirmed around for a few seconds before settling down beneath his blanket once more. I lowered the

pistol I had drawn and slipped it back into its holster. I doubted that he would have done anything, but he might have been checking if breaking Axten's head off would have been possible. Then he was still again, and I continued my vigil.

The sky began to grow red in the east, and Axten turned himself on moments before Hiblon and Nolthel rose. We ate a few bars of cold rations, drank some water from our jugs, then mounted our bikes and began the day's ride. We flew across the sand, going a hundred kilometers an hour. If the open desert held out, we'd catch our bounty within a couple days and be offplanet shortly afterward.

But the plains didn't continue. After about three hours of riding, we arrived at the Io-losh that the natives had referred to. It was a great spine of mountains, their peaks tall enough to scrape against the dusky sky. The great red sun hovered just above them, pouring its light between their tips.

Hiblon closed with us. "The Io-losh is a harsh place. There is little water to be found anywhere in its high reaches, and the occasional well is jealously guarded. There are very few navigable passes, but we are close to the one usually used by the traders. There is a tribe guarding it that demands tribute from those who use it. I have some things that they might like, but if they do not, each of you will have to be ready to fight. Take a drink, then we go, in single file."

I did, taking a long gulp from my canteen and topping it off from the water tanks attached to my bike. Axten checked the charge on his rifle.

There were fifty kilometers more of desert before we reached the base of the Io-losh Mountains. The rock was hard, dark red, and worn to glassy smoothness by the wind in places. They weren't actually individual mountains, but a continuous ridge with several peaks daggering the top. Three kilometers was about the maximum height, but it seemed much higher from below.

The pass was before us, a dark, V-shaped cleft sliced out of the solid rock by some ancient river. It was a kilometer across, and extended forward for several more, penetrating the heart of the Io-losh. A broad track of packed sand and stone went along the center.

Nolthel took the lead. Hiblon had apparently briefed him ahead of time as to the route, allowing the pale-skinned human to stay well back. Axten rode close behind me, so we'd be together in case of an attack. We entered the pass, and there were a million places where armed warriors could hide. The slopes of the mountains soared high above, and the sun stained my fur red. Axten's chromeel carapace glimmered, and dust flew up behind our bikes. We had to decrease our speed in order to avoid bits of debris that littered the valley floor.

I could see a column of smoke several kilometers ahead. A settlement, and a large one. Soon I could also see that there was a crude wall stretched across the narrowest part of the valley, pieced together from chunks of red stone and spongy wood. There were beings clustered along its top long before we arrived. Hiblon ordered us to come together once more, and we approached the wall in a line. The natives above were the same species as those of the High Rock, but much taller, straighter standing, and better muscled. They carried themselves like fighters, while the others had practically cringed even when they were trying to look dangerous. These beings carried some iron weapons—axes, cudgels with teeth and scraps of metal embedded in them, and lances, alongside bows and atlatls with spears tipped by copper, bone, or stone shards. Their faces and chests were scarred and tattooed, and they wore ornaments of bone and rock.

One of them called out a challenge in his language, gurgling in his throat. Hiblon switched his translator on, held it toward the being, and said, "We have tribute to pay for passage through the gates of the Blood Peaks."

The warrior seemed to have encountered translators before, for he leaned down without hesitation and said, "Show us your tribute, or pay blood price."

Hiblon signaled Nolthel, who got off his bike and removed a package from its side. He undid a latch with his long fingers to display an interior lined with gold and jewels. I could tell that they were mostly plastic and cheap metal, with some thin leaf beaten over the surfaces, but I didn't say anything about that to the natives.

The spokesman was obviously impressed. He said, "The riches you offer are great, off-worlders. Give them to me and pass through before I demand blood price."

The gate swung open, and we walked through with bikes in tow. Nolthel handed the chest to the warrior on the other side, who exulted openly over his wealth, his yellowed teeth showing in a broad grin. He waved us on and said, "Go. Our village is well guarded, and you will be killed if you go near it."

"Wait," said Hiblon. "Did another off-worlder pass through this gate some days ago, in the company of some traders?"

The warrior considered this, and then nodded. "I am told he did. I will tell you more in return for more riches."

Hiblon refused, and we left before they got greedy enough to attack us. The pass broadened out, and here we saw signs of habitation. Footprints covered the dusty ground, and there were scraps of food, broken tools, and animal remains lying around. In a side ravine, I saw the source of the smoke: a crude fortress of the same rough construction as the wall, with fires glowing in its depths, surrounded by a forest of trees. There must have been a submerged water table there, to allow such dense inhabitation.

We passed by, seeing no sign of any more natives—until four of them came around a boulder and jumped us, screaming as loud as they could. They were big and strong, with iron axes and bone cudgels. I pulled my pistols and was able to snap off a couple of shots before one of them hit me, knocking me off my bike. His warm body crushed me into the gravelly sand. He raised his axe for a killing blow at my head, but I got my arms under him and thrust upward. He lifted off me as I rolled away from the axe blow, snatching up one of my fallen pistols. I put three bolts into his torso before he stopped moving.

I saw that Axten had killed two others with his slug pistol before they had been able to approach him. Nolthel was still struggling with his. I ran up and planted a kick in the native's side, unbalancing him enough for Nolthel to snap his neck with powerful hands.

Hiblon eyed the four shattered corpses lazily, and then looked up to see a party of ten natives standing behind the bodies of their comrades, stern expressions on their faces. One of them spoke: "Pass on, off-worlder. You have proven yourselves worthy."

As we fired our engines once more, I heard Hiblon's translator whisper something—he had forgotten to turn it off. The natives were saying, "They were fools. I have seen some off-worlders in my years, but those are the most dangerous ones to be put before my eyes yet."

I was honored.

We reached the end of the Io-losh as night was falling. There had been a track, but toward the end it had been so chaotic that we had needed to walk our bikes. We sheltered ourselves behind a tor formed of the same rock as the main spine, sitting around Hiblon's heat lantern.

My eyelids were getting heavier, but I let Axten get his rest first. In the meantime, I talked to Hiblon.

"Can you give me any details about our bounty? It might be useful to know what sort of man he is."

Hiblon shrugged. "About the same as any thief. Greedy and cowardly. It isn't worth thinking about. He's no fighter, and you three will have no trouble taking him."

A man who would flee to a world like this certainly couldn't be called cowardly. The Patrol came through the system only occasionally, checking for illegal interference with the natives, making it a better planet to escape to than some, but there were thousands of more benign worlds that would have hidden him almost as well. I decided to drop the subject before Hiblon got suspicious.

He went to sleep, and then it was just Nolthel and I staring at each other over the top of the lantern. His frill was swaying slowly in the breeze, and his eyes never moved away from my face.

"Flinteye," he said at last, "I can win my own fights."

My hand settled on my pistol butt. "When have I doubted that?"

He showed me his pointed teeth. "When you kicked that native off me."

"I'm beginning to regret that myself." I had barely remembered the incident, but that's what I thought in retrospect.

Faster then I could follow he leapt straight over the lantern, knocked my pistol away, and held his knife against my throat. He hissed into my earhole, "I could kill you now, Flinteye, and then take your 'bot while he's shut down. I'm not even sure why I don't. What could Hiblon do to me? He can't fight. He'd just have to settle for one fighter instead of three."

I didn't give him the pleasure of hearing me beg. I bared my fangs and stayed silent. His silver eyes strove with my black ones in silent combat. He pressed the knife down a little harder, and a streamer of blood flowed across my neck and stained the sand. "Squeal, Flinteye. Squeal for your life, and maybe I'll let you have it."

He didn't get any further than that. A second blade appeared over his own neck—one of Axten's wrist blades, extended above his folded-back hand. "Let Jalazar go. I'll be the one left to Hiblon if you don't."

I could see his photo-receptors glowing in the darkness. Axten gave off very little heat, so I had trouble seeing the rest of him. Nolthel's eyes bulged, and for a moment I thought he was going to disregard his own safety and cut my throat. Then, to my relief, he lifted his dagger and thrust it back into its sheath. "Right. Let me up," he growled.

Axten retracted his blade and locked his hand back into position. Nolthel stomped over to the other side of the lamp, threw himself down near Hiblon, and lay still.

"You sleep, Jalazar. I'll wake you in time for me to rest," said Axten, slipping his ion rifle off his back and laying it across his legs as he sat on the ground.

It took me a few minutes to drop off, mainly because of the sharp pain in my neck, where blood was still trickling.

Hiblon didn't notice the gash in my neck when we awoke at dawn or, if he did, he didn't say anything about it. Axten and I rode a little farther away from Nolthel than we usually did, even though he didn't show any sign of remembrance. I kept a careful eye on him. It would only take him a few seconds to kill us with his blade-thrower. If he looked like he was going to try it, I'd have to kill him. I probably should have done it out of hand, but something restrained me. I

had to be better than Nolthel, not just faster on the draw.

The day was long and hot. Hiblon seemed to have a good idea of where we were going, and we rode all day without stopping. The land was rockier on this side of the Io-losh, and we had to decrease our speed to navigate it. The wildlife remained more or less the same: herds of skinless mammals, predator crustaceans, and an occasional avian in the sky. I once saw something like a giant worm, with no features of any kind on its body, coiled in a crevice, but didn't investigate it any further.

The next day, we arrived at another native settlement, a place situated in a shallow valley with a natural spring at its center. The place was ringed by tors of stone, and there were sentries positioned on each of these, armed and dressed almost identically to those we had encountered in the Io-losh. They roared out a challenge as we approached, and a spear sprayed sand in front of Nolthel's bike. A warrior arrayed in animal hide approached and spoke in the general direction of the translator without prompting. "Tell us your business, off-worlder," he snarled.

The others raised spears ready for throwing or nocked arrows to their bows. Hiblon answered, "We seek news of a trader caravan that may have passed here recently. They would have had another off-worlder with them, a man with white skin. Have you seen such a party?"

The native answered without hesitation: "No off-worlder has come to us for a long count of days. The last caravan was sixty days ago, and there was no off-worlder in their company."

Hiblon paused, but only for a moment. To show indecision in front of the natives would be dangerous. "Is there a place that caravans go after they cross the Io-losh that is before your village? Is there another place where these traders might have gone?"

The native grinned widely, brandishing his axe. "That depends who these traders are. Do you know what peoples they did business with?"

"The Village of the High Rock, for one, and they passed the tribe that guards the Io-losh pass."

The warrior clapped his hands together. "High Rock? I know the tribe you seek. Only they do trade with the High Rock. The traders you are after came from the Mgas tribe. They dwell many days journey to the north of here. They do business with the High Rock, offering food and patronship in return for goods. No one attacks the High Rock, plundering their water, food, or women, for fear of the Mgas. They are the mightiest warriors in the world. There are other villages they defend, and every year they dispatch some of their men to trade with these."

Hiblon nodded, his expression considerably lightened. "Thank you, noble warrior. We will be off and trouble you no more."

He turned to go. One of the warriors raised his spear and hurled it, tearing my vest and slashing my side. My blood spurted onto the sand. I snarled, drawing both my pistols, and weapons clattered as the native warriors prepared for battle. Axten was beside me, ion rifle held ready, and even Nolthel had cocked his blade thrower.

The warrior Hiblon had spoken to said, "You must pay us tribute, or you shall die. I have told you much."

I wasn't happy that, although Hiblon had been the one to offend them, I was the one who got hurt. I suppose that's what happens to bodyguards. But why couldn't it have happened to Nolthel, at least?

Hiblon took another box off his bike, smaller than the one he had displayed at the pass. This one's mixed assortment of zinc and plastic junk wasn't as good, but it seemed to please the warrior spokesman. "This is good, off-worlder, but not enough. More."

To emphasize, another arrow clipped Axten's torso. It didn't do much more than scratch his plating.

Hiblon could see that the situation was getting dangerous. He reached for a second box and displayed the contents. It was almost identical to the first one. The spokesman took it, grinning broadly. He ran his fingers over the trinkets, which would have been sold in vending machines for a quarter-SEU apiece on most Alliance worlds. When they were added to the other one at his side, he said, "Still not enough. I have an idea, offworlder. You give us all you have—weapons, machines, jewels—and we will allow you to keep your lives as slaves in our village."

I looked over his shoulder and realized that the number of warriors facing us had greatly increased. Reinforcements had been brought up while he and Hiblon were conversing. I decided that the time for talking was over. Four plasma bolts from my pistols drilled into the warrior's chest, and he died with the grin still frozen onto his face.

The natives paused, stunned, but I didn't. Before the corpse had time to fall, I kicked it down and fired over it, lacing the warriors beyond with plasma. Axten started firing almost as quickly. The near invisible beams of his ion rifle struck with lethal precision. Nolthel's arm came up, and circular blades flashed out to open up a man who had been aiming a spear at Hiblon.

The natives fought back. Arrows and spears flew at us. One lodged in my shoulder, kicking me back. I roared and hammered the thrower with plasma, then tore the missile out and threw it back at the warriors. I took a grenade out of my pack, armed it, and threw it as far back into the mass of black-skinned natives as I could. They seemed to freeze solid in the moment before it went off. It had been a small grenade, but the results were good. A cloud of orange fire burst up in the middle of the crowd, throwing natives into the air and burning their bodies to dust. We kept firing. Even Hiblon had pulled out a small plasma pistol.

After the grenade, they had had enough. All of them went screaming back to their village at the valley's center, hurling spears and arrows behind them wildly. We kept firing until they were out of our effective range, and then Hiblon told us to stop. "Save your ammo. You'll need it later. They won't do anything to us again."

I snarled, holstering my pistols. Blood was spilling freely from my torn shoulder and side. I looked over at Nolthel and saw that he had another arrow stuck in his leg that he was trying to free.

"I apologize," said Hiblon. "I should never have given them anything. They took that as a sign of weakness, and didn't see why they should let such good things escape."

Axten came up to me with a length of white bandage in his hands. He hadn't been hurt seriously, but his legs seemed a little displaced. I'd have to have a look at them later. I let him bandage my wound, Hiblon helped Nolthel with his, and then we got back on our bikes and rode for the village of the Mgas.

I checked over Axten's legs when we stopped for the night. It had been a shot aimed at his power core which had barely missed, a shot skillfully aimed by someone who knew how a 'bot was put together. I dug out the cause of the wound: A circular blade, the kind Nolthel used.

He was talking to Hiblon and didn't notice me as I held it up for Axten to see. He nodded. "It felt like that. I thought it might be some little native weapon, but the thought did occur to me."

"He's trying to kill you," I growled. My claws brushed my pistol's grip.

Axten nodded. "Don't do anything, Jalazar. Shoot him when he makes a move, and not

before."

"He's already made a move! Next time it might be too late. He might have better aim."

"At least wait until Hiblon's asleep."

That, at least, I could agree with. We sat back and looked at the stars until Hiblon rolled himself up in his blanket and fell asleep.

Nolthel was staring at the heat lantern, which now gave off only a pale glow. He didn't seem to know what we had discovered. I pulled out the blade and tossed it at his feet. "Remember that?" I hissed.

He picked it up, wiped sand off it, and put in into his ammo pouch. "I do."

I drew my pistol and aimed it at his head. "You tried to kill Axten."

His silver eyes glimmered in the lamp's light. "I tried to shut down a machine that irritates me."

Axten sat back, completely silent. My fangs were showing. "That machine is more a person than you are, Nolthel. I should kill you now."

"Perhaps you should, Flinteye. I do not question that. What I ask is, will you? I think not."

He grinned, his head crest spreading itself out a little. "You don't brag about it, Flinteye, but the heart inside your chest is made of jelly. I don't have to be close to you to know that you couldn't kill me like this. I don't have a weapon drawn. If you did shoot me, you wouldn't be able to forget it. It would eat your jelly heart out."

My finger tensed on the trigger. "You might be wrong."

"I think not."

I gritted my teeth. The gun shook in my hand. I wanted to shoot him, but he was right. I couldn't blast him while he was just sitting there grinning, his hands far away from his weapons. If he reached for the blade thrower or the knife, I wouldn't hesitate, but he wasn't doing either.

I put the pistol away and snarled. "Next time, I won't wait. I'll shoot you the moment you draw weapons against Axten, and I don't care what Hiblon sees."

Nolthel didn't favor me with an answer. He just flopped down and fell asleep.

I looked over at Axten. "Should I have killed him?"

He shook his head. "No. You cannot kill Nolthel by being like Nolthel. Don't worry, Jalazar—I will not allow him to destroy me."

"If he had aimed a little better today you'd already be dead."

Axten's structure didn't quite allow him to shrug, but that's what he would have done if he could. "I'm not dead, and I'll watch him more closely. Go to sleep, Jalazar."

"No. You first. I need some time to think before I can do that."

"As you wish."

He shut himself down, and I drew a pistol and put in on my lap. If Nolthel so much as stirred before daylight, I'd burn him.

It was late afternoon before we reached the Mgas settlement. Axten's airbike broke down, and we had to stop and repair it. Axten did most of the work himself—Nolthel and I were busy watching each other, hands never going far from our weapons.

The Mgas made their home on a hill of rock, an island among the dunes. Their walls were solid stone, nothing like the crude fortifications in the Io-losh pass. They dwelt in well-built houses, with the smoke from cook fires rising up above them. The walls were penetrated by gates—doors with metal hinges and reinforcements. The warriors on the top of the wall were

the largest and best armed we had seen yet, with mostly iron weapons and gleaming armor made from the carapaces of the predators we had seen. They had skull helmets gleaming on their heads, and the fingers and knuckles of their hide gloves were tipped with spurs of bone.

Two beings with swords, spears, and hide shields hailed us as we stopped our airbikes before the gate. Hiblon held up his translator, set to a high pickup level. "Who comes to the city of the Mgas?" one of them boomed in a voice stronger than any other I had heard out of the natives. His speech, before it was translated, sounded somewhat different from that of the other natives we had encountered—another dialect of the language, or a very strong accent. There was a slight lag between when his speech entered the machine and came out in Standard—the translator had to work harder at it.

Hiblon gave his usual speech about our quest for an off-worlder with white skin. The native replied, "Yes, he came here. He is not with us any longer, however."

"Where can he be found?"

"For that, you will have to talk with my lord. Come in, off-worlders. The Mgas welcome you, with one condition: You must remove your powerful weapons, and wear only those used by warriors of Polod. My lord will tolerate no entry into the city otherwise."

Hiblon seemed startled, and I was equally so. I had expected these Mgas to have hostility proportional to their strength, but this guard had proven that wrong.

"Yes, we would like to enter. Nolthel, Flinteye, Axten, get rid of your guns and leave them with the bikes. Take knives only."

Nolthel wasn't happy with leaving his blade thrower. "I don't like this. They could kill us all easily as soon as we are within their walls."

Hiblon nodded. "You're right."

Then, to the guard on the wall, he said, "You must give us your word that we will not be harmed within your walls by any member of the Mgas tribe."

"Word is given, unless you attack any Mgas. Open the gates!"

Moments after he spoke, the great iron bound gates ground open. Ten warriors, all of them armored and heavily armed, stood beyond it. We walked forward, leaving our guns on our bikes, and were enfolded in a square formed by the warriors. They marched us forward into the city.

It was better laid out than a lot of space-faring places I had been in, and much cleaner. The streets looked like they were even swept occasionally. The stone houses were well constructed. The warriors surrounding us were big and healthy, as were the villagers we passed. They were interested in us, but not shocked—the Mgas were the wealthiest and most advanced tribe in this region of Polod, and illegal traders often dealt with them. Even Axten wasn't a surprise to them— 'bots had been to the city before. Out of all of us, I probably frightened them the most. Animals with fur were almost unknown on Polod.

There were thousands of people living there, supported by springs and enormous groves of vegetation that wound their way around the hill. The mound was penetrated by water from Polod's deep wells, and the Mgas did not go thirsty. There were pens full of the bare-skinned mammals, coops filled with avians, and orchards of fruit bearing trees. At the summit sat a large building, made from enormous chunks of stone that was decorated with wood, bone, and metal. The guards standing before its doors had iron helmets instead of bone ones, and they were even bigger than our escorts. Their axe-bladed spears crossed as we approached. "Who comes to see the Mgas lord?"

They no doubt had a specific title for their ruler, but the translator was rendering it in its

literal meaning. The leader of our escort, a man with decorations on his skull helmet and carved plates on his shoulders, spoke to them. The translator didn't pick it up, but the guards admitted us without any more resistance. We went on into a great hall, where more warriors joined the group surrounding us.

The chamber was lit by shafts of light coming through holes in the ceiling, and the walls had long windows cut into them. The stone was carved with simple geometric designs in most places, but a few elaborate mosaics and murals could be seen.

At the far end of the hall lay a raised dais, and upon it, sitting on a dark stone chair in a column of light, was a man covered with gold and bone ornaments. A crown of iron rested on his head, and his armor was gilded around the edges of the plates. A richly dressed female in a small wooden chair sat at his side, and a young man waited at his other side. Another group of warriors stood behind the throne. The whole thing was more glorious than most Alliance palaces, and a lot less ugly than most crime boss lairs. All the riches of underworld lords couldn't have given them the majesty possessed by the being on the throne. It wasn't like anything else on Polod that we had seen. I wondered if we were still only a few kilometers away from the last village. It seemed almost like we had come to a different planet.

The lord of the Mgas, as the translator insisted on calling him, beckoned us forward. The guards opened in front of us, and the four of us walked up to stand at the foot of the throne. The lord's eyes moved slowly over each of us: Hiblon, clothed in his simple but neat clothes, gray Nolthel with his bare chest, Axten's chromeel frame, and my black-eyed face and golden furred body. It was almost like he saw off-worlders every day, from the way he looked at us. His scrutiny ended, and he talked into Hiblon's translator.

"Off-worlders, what is it that you wish from the Mgas?"

"We're looking for another off-worlder who had passed through your realm, lord. He was like me in appearance, with only slightly darker skin."

"And why do you seek him?"

Hiblon paused, and then said, "He has committed a crime against my master, a great lord among the stars. We have come to capture him and take him off-world for judgment."

The Mgas lord's expression changed for the worse. He folded his hands together and said, "Such a one did indeed come here, but he was our friend in all things. Why should we surrender him to you? I do not know what he has done off-world, but here, in my city, he has done nothing but good. He lifts up children when they stumble, he is polite to women, and he is the equal of my warriors in courage. If you have come to take him and likely kill him, then why should I give him to you?"

Odd. Hiblon had made Eliron sound like gutter slime.

"He has committed a great crime amongst my people. I have come to serve justice."

"And what is this crime? What crime could Eliron have done? His heart is as pure as the heights of the sky."

"He stole a fortune from my master, acting with deceit. We have been able to recover the money, but justice must be done."

The Mgas lord sighed, lowering his head into his hands. "Eliron is not under my protection. He left the city a few days ago. A well some ways to the north of here is now his home, and he went there to live with only two Mgas friends as company."

He lifted his head, and the look he gave Hiblon would have been enough to shatter stone. "I will not impede your justice, but I also will not rejoice in the capture of Eliron. Go, before I order you all killed."

Hiblon switched off his translator, turned, and began to walk from the hall. I followed. I might have been able to kill a few with only my dagger and bare hands, but there were more than enough to take all of us. The lord stood up from his throne, arms crossed over his chest, as we left.

At midmorning of the next day, we came into sight of the fugitive Eliron's hiding place. Nearly every settlement on Polod was built around a geologic feature with a spring, and this was no exception—a mountain of sheer rock, penetrated by a few caves higher up.

We got close enough to see a lot of detail on the mountain, then dismounted and made the final approach on foot. Again, I was glad to be wearing boots; the sand was hot enough to cook meat, and my feet wouldn't have been a challenge for it. We had no doubt been spotted already, and we made no effort at stealth. Each of us carried weapons openly, with new clips or charges loaded. My blood pumped with excitement—a cornered being was dangerous, and usually made for a good fight.

Hiblon talked as we move forward. "Don't kill Eliron. You can shoot any others he might have with him, but I want him alive. You all have taser cartridges?"

My plasma pistols and Nolthel's blade thrower had small stun launchers bolted to their sides, and Axten's rifle could produce a stunning effect at low enough power levels. Hiblon wouldn't be doing any fighting.

We spread out. Eliron might start shooting at any time, and it would be best not to give him too large a target in one place. As always, I made sure I was between Axten and Nolthel. Our pace increased to a jog as we got closer to the great mountainous tor. I could see a set of stairs winding up the mountain until they reached the mouth of a large cave—no doubt Eliron's hole. We'd have to fight our way up those, enter the cavern, kill any guards he might have, and take him down. I'd make sure that Nolthel took the lead, and that I kept Axten in sight all the time.

The first missile to come at us wasn't a plasma bolt; it was a bronze tipped arrow, fired from the mouth of the cave above. It went over Axten's shoulder and rebounded off a rock nearby, throwing sparks into the air. Another arrow flew as we hit the rocks and started to climb up the stairs. Nolthel was forced into the front, I went behind him, and Axten guarded our rear. Hiblon took cover behind a convenient outcropping and waited until the fight was over.

Our progress was steady, and the steps were sheltered enough so that opportunities for the archer were rare. We moved quickly, leaping the steps two at a time. Nolthel had his knife in one hand and his blade thrower in the other, while his plasma caribine was slung over his back. His frill was stretched to its maximum size, and his pointed teeth were bared. For a moment, he had forgotten his hatred of Axten and I, and was caught up in the thrill of the hunt. An arrow licked against his arm, spilling his blood, but he didn't notice it. I could hear Axten behind me, his joints whirring faintly. As we ascended, the desert spread itself out below us. Hiblon was a speck on the sand.

Nolthel swung himself over the top and put a blade into the archer, ending his life quickly. I followed, sweeping the cave mouth with my pistols, fingers tensed on the triggers. Nothing. It was still, and there was too much heat trapped in the cave to make out individual forms.

Nolthel went in, leaping over the archer's dead body. He didn't have any armor, but I could still tell that he was Mgas. From within the cave, Nolthel bellowed, and I heard the ring of steel. I went in, pistols held out before me.

I could see the dark shapes of simple furnishing and a couple mobile shadows writhing in

the center. Nolthel was grappling with another Mgas warrior, and their knives were glimmering faintly. He had almost split my windpipe the last time I helped him—I'd let him take care of his own fights this time. Aside from that, there was one other figure in the room. For a moment, the darkness was lit up by a flurry of plasma bolts, aimed at me. He didn't have a chance to fire again. I put two stun slugs into him before he dropped the pistol, then I ran up and wrapped my arms around his. Nolthel dispatched his opponent with a quick knife thrust, and I hauled my captive into the sunlight. Polod's hot light showed a human face that had once been noble, but now it was dirty, the chin was coated in a thin beard, and it was drawn taut by the stun charges. The hair was blond, the eyes were green, the chin was straight. He was wearing white coveralls, now smudged brown in many places. I put him on the ground and wrapped his hands together with some rope I had in my pack. The stun charge wouldn't last long, and he looked strong. I didn't want his hands around my throat.

Axten was standing on the edge of the shelf in front of the cave. I looked up, and he languidly raised his rifle. "Next time, Jalazar, I'm going in first. You always take all the action and leave me with mop-up."

Nolthel came out of the darkness, wiping his dagger on a white cloth. His grin hadn't shrunk. "You got him Flinteye? Didn't put up much of a fight, did he?"

I didn't bother to show him where my vest was singed from proximity to plasma. Axten signaled to Hiblon, telling him that we had been successful. The pale-faced human made some hand gestures that I couldn't interpret, but when he didn't move I assumed he wanted us to bring Eliron down. Axten slung the ion rifle over his back and carried the human in his hands, leaving Nolthel and I to watch each other. The way down wasn't as arduous as the way up, but it seemed a lot longer. Eliron had started to recover from the stunning by the time we reached the bottom, but he didn't struggle or say anything. He just gazed off into the sky or at Axten's face, his expression resigned.

Hiblon ran up to meet us, and we set the captive down a piece of rock. His mouth was working, and he said, "Hiblon, greetings. So that toad of a master has sent you along with these bounty hunters?"

"Shut up. Flinteye, gag him."

Hiblon handed me the cloth, and just as I was about to put it in his mouth, Eliron roared, "The Patrol will catch him yet, Hiblon! He can't keep his thieving up forever!"

I hesitated. Eliron went on. "Yes, bounty hunters. You might be able to save his warted hide now, but someone else is going to find out. They won't be beaten by some SEUs slipped into their account and called embezzlement."

I showed him my fangs. "What are you talking about?"

"Gag him," growled Hiblon.

"I worked for the Governor for a year before I found out what he was doing. Bleeding the planet dry, and every SEU went straight to his private account. I found out, and was about to go to the Patrol when he filled my account up with SEUs and accused me of theft. I barely made it off planet alive, and got here eventually, after a couple run-ins with bounty hunters."

I studied his face. There was truth in it. Faintly, I heard Hiblon shriek, "Nolthel! Get him!"

"Axten!" I called, then heard the crash and scuffle as my 'bot intercepted the assassin. I pivoted, aiming a pistol at Hiblon.

"Why didn't you use the Patrol, Hiblon? It would have been cheaper for your master and a lot more...honest than hiring bounty hunters. I don't think you've been telling Axten and I the

truth."

"What difference does it make? I hired you to do a job. Do it!"

I saw his fingers creeping towards his holster and snapped off a warning bolt. It went close enough to singe his clothes. Axten had managed to pin Nolthel to the ground, but he was struggling. Hiblon took his hand away from his weapon. "Tell me why I should help you take Eliron. The Mgas said he was a great being, and Polod doesn't seem like a place that your craven embezzler would flee to."

"The only reason you need is money."

"Wrong. I'm not going to take this man if he's going to be killed for something he didn't do."

For once, Hiblon's skin lost its pallor. His face turned red. "Traitor!" he howled.

That word almost made me drop my pistol. I *was* a traitor, something I had hated for most of my life. Beings who couldn't be trusted, beings who lied and stabbed you in the back. I despised them, and now, in a few moments time, I had become one.

The pistol stayed where it was. "You lied to me, Hiblon. I don't like beings lying to me."

He relaxed a little, but his body remained tense. None of his anger had left. "Well, Flinteye, what now? Are you going to kill me? Very well, go ahead."

"No. But I'm not going to let you take Eliron, either."

I looked over to Axten. He was getting tired, and Nolthel was still struggling. "Axten, let him up. I'll shoot him if he attacks you."

Axten managed to disengage his arms and draw his slug pistol fast enough to stay out of Nolthel's grip. The assassin moved back to join Hiblon, snarling silently, his slit nostrils flared.

Hiblon turned abruptly and ran. He was no athlete, but he could sprint when he needed to. Nolthel followed after a moment, and they made for the bikes together. Axten and I looked on silently. Then got on their bikes and gunned the engines, but instead of going right away, Hiblon removed a device from his baggage and pressed buttons on it. The other two bikes started up, lifting off the sand. Hiblon pushed down on his pedals, speeding away across the sand, and the empty bikes followed him. Slave circuits—I should have guessed that.

I turned to Eliron, who had gotten to his feet and was eying me warily. "Alright, human. I'll cut that rope. Get us up to your cave, and I'm hoping you have some food."

The third time over the steps was the one I enjoyed least. I felt like kicking the human, toppling him over the side to a death on the crags at the tor's foot. Eventually I dropped back and let Axten go in front of me. I could seethe better in the back. At the top, the archer was just as dead as he had been a few minutes before. One of the gray assassin's blades was still lodged in the native's flesh, so Axten jerked it out and slipped it into a pouch on his waist belt. I didn't ask him why he or anyone else would want a reminder of Nolthel.

Eliron paused for a moment to look sadly at the dead archer, and I thought I saw his lips move. Then he went into the dark cave, and a moment later a light flared up. Axten and I stepped in.

It was a fairly large room, and I could see a couple of other galleries branching away from it. A spongy carpet of some kind covered the center of the floor, and there were broad dishes in place of tables and hide mats to sit on. I could see a few of Eliron's possessions scattered around: a book reader and a box of cartridges for it, the plasma weapon he had dropped, and the Mgas warrior Nolthel had killed. Axten dragged the corpse out into the sunlight and stretched it alongside the other one. It pained Eliron to see that, but he was busy rummaging in a wooden

box. After a moment, he pulled out a bulging skin and a chunk of dried meat. He handed both to me and said, "I've eaten recently, and I assume that your 'bot doesn't need anything."

I grunted, sinking my fangs into the meat. It was smoked rather than salted—essential on a world where thirst was deadly. The flavor wasn't noteworthy. It was a painless way to fill my stomach, better than the ration bars I had been living off of for several days. I ate it all, then took several gulps from the water bag. He took it back when I was done and put it back in the sack. "What is your name?" he asked.

"Jalazar Flinteye."

He hadn't heard it before. "I must thank you, Flinteye, for saving my life. Hiblon's master would have murdered me."

I growled. "Don't mention it. But now we're stuck here in the desert, without bikes, I won't get paid for this little endeavor, Hiblon will probably destroy the *Flint Shard*, and you've made me betray an employer!"

My voice had risen to a roar at the end, but he didn't flinch. He knew as well as I did that I wouldn't hurt him after risking my life, my money, and my ship to save him.

"Don't worry about the *Shard*, Jalazar," said Axten. "Hiblon won't leave without Eliron, and Nolthel won't leave without killing both of us."

That didn't make me feel any better. I grated my claws against the floor. "So what will they do? Bring a war band of natives out here to attack us until we run out of ammo? At least they won't be Mgas. I think I could take a few hundred of another tribe, but maybe not them."

Eliron shook his head. "The Mgas lord was a friend of mine, but not all of them are like minded. They have many warriors who would leap at the chance to kill off-worlders. Only the direct protection of the lord held them back while I was in the city, and as you've seen he doesn't protect those outside his immediate domain, aside from the tribes he patronizes. Hiblon will return with Mgas warriors, and soon."

"Well, what are we sitting around here for? Let's get ready to fight."

"Don't you think we should do something about my friends first? You killed them."

I hadn't noticed the lingering pain on his face, looking at the two natives stretched out on the ground. I nodded. "Alright. We'll put them away in the sand, or whatever you like. But I didn't kill them—that was Nolthel."

He acknowledged that, and we spent the next hour going down the steps, piling some stones up on top of the corpses, and then trudging back up. The hard work gave me a chance to work off some of my fury, but it still smoldered. When Axten and Eliron decided to spend some time piling rocks in front of the cave, for rolling down on the attackers, I sat inside. My teeth were both clenched and bared, and my hard black eyes stabbed at the air.

The day faded slowly. Eliron and Axten came back into the cave when the sky was darkening, and while Eliron got out his book reader and started going through a volume, Axten sat down next to me, not saying anything. Hours passed. Eliron fed me again, this time taking some for himself. I devoured the meat, drank from the skin, and then kept sitting. Axten and I seemed to make the Alliance man nervous. He went into one of the back rooms a few minutes after dinner.

The stars appeared outside the cave. Polod was on the fringes of the galaxy, and not even in Alliance space, so most of what we could see was a white band of thickly packed stars stretching across the black sky. It was beautiful, but I wasn't in any mood to appreciate it.

"I wouldn't worry about it, Jalazar," said Axten.

For hours, neither of us had spoken, and the noise was jolting. "Worry about what?"

"What you did today."

His red photo-receptors met my black eyes. "Yes," I snarled. "My betrayal. My sacrifice of both our lives."

"Betrayal is a bad thing, Jalazar. That's true. But a worse thing would have been to let Hiblon take his prey, knowing that the crime described to you was a lie. Hiblon deceived you, Jalazar, and thus was the first traitor."

My lips pulled back a little farther, showing the roots of my pointed teeth. "I should never have taken this job."

"I agree. I would have liked to spend some of the SEUs from the last one."

I chuckled. "Right, Axten. That's the first thing we'll be doing when we get through this."

"I'm glad to know that. I'll take first watch, and you get your six hours. We won't need to be up at dawn."

"Five hours. You need the rest more than I do. You were piling rocks all day."

Axten went outside to look at the stars, and I fell asleep quickly.

In the morning, Eliron announced that he had come up with a way that we could save our lives. He had my attention.

"The Mgas, and every other tribe with any honor, have a custom in which, when a man is outnumbered, he may fight a series of single combats to save his life rather than be mobbed by the whole war band. If he can defeat a number of opponents prescribed by his attackers—almost never more than three, by tradition—his life is granted to him."

I grunted. "I assume I wouldn't be able to use plasma?"

"No. Among the Mgas, such contests are fought only with armor and blades."

"In that case, all I have is this."

I drew my dagger and threw it on the floor it front of me. He picked it up and examined it. "An excellent blade, but not long or heavy enough for serious combat."

"Of course," I growled. "So I think we'd better just keep firing into them until our ammo runs out."

"How much do you have, Flinteye?"

I realized that I had left most of my spare charges on the bike that Hiblon had taken. "I have fresh ones in my pistols, two full ones, and a couple which are almost drained."

"How much does your 'bot have?"

I let Axten answer that one himself. "Not much more. Two spare charges for my rifle and one extra clip for my slug gun. I've also got these," he said, folding his hands back and snapping two dagger blades out of his wrists. "But, as you said, not long or heavy enough."

He drew them back and locked his hands into position.

"Impressive," said Eliron. "You're an assassin model, I presume?"

"He is," I said, "and the most sentient robot in the galaxy."

"I gathered as much yesterday."

"Back to the problem, human. Have you got any Mgas weapons?"

He sat up straight. "Yes, now that I think of it, Rockbone and Blacktooth did have swords, but they were too young to have suits of armor, I'm afraid. Here, I'll get them for you."

He vanished into one of the side caverns, and returned after a few minutes of rummaging with a pair of broadswords in his hands. The hilts were wrapped with animal hide, and the blades were about two and a half feet long. "Have you ever used a sword before?" he asked me.

I nodded. "A little. I once did some training in the Ima-han style—that was designed for

swords. Axten too."

"I don't recognize the name. What is that like?"

"A lot of slashing and body movement. The ideal sword for it was pretty light, but the style was designed to be used with several different blades."

Eliron tossed one of the swords to me, locked in a sheath of dry, spongy wood. I slid it out and examined the blade. It was skillfully forged, and cared for well—the edge was sharp. I weighed it in my hand. It was heavy, while the Ima-han swords had been slender and light. "Do you know how to use them?" I asked Eliron.

"My friends taught me a little."

"Draw, then."

He pulled his sword out of its scabbard and threw the sheath aside. I took up the basic stance that I had learned—feet planted in a T-shape, blade held up by my shoulder. Eliron held his weapon with the point thrust towards me, his feet side-by-side and his back bent forward. Axten watched.

I attacked, swinging for his head. My sword clashed against his as he brought the tip up a few centimeters to block. I kept pressing forward, lifting my sword again and spinning it around to strike on the other side. Eliron blocked that too, with a minimum of movement.

It had been quite a while since I had practiced, but I had beaten the techniques into my head well. I slipped into the movements, and the sword swung easily in my hand. Eliron wasn't as good as I was. He was on the defensive for most of our duel, only sometimes thrusting and chopping back at me. The style he was using seemed like the opposite of mine. While mine emphasized motion, his seemed to involve a minimum of movement and precise blade control. We fought for a half hour, going around the cave several times. No blood was drawn. The fight ended when I disarmed him with a poorly executed version of an Ima-han twist. His sword clattered to the ground, and Eliron had to massage the feeling back into his fingers. "Excellent. You are a fine swordsman, Flinteye, or at least better than I am."

"They'll pick their best warriors to fight me," I hissed. "Not an off-worlder with a few hours of practice."

Eliron shook his head. "They won't be expecting a style like yours, Flinteye. That's what they do with axes and cudgels. Swords are supposed to be precise instruments."

Axten picked up the fallen sword, weighing it in his hands. He had studied Ima-han with me, but I wasn't quite sure how much he had gotten out of it. I had actually seen him training with a variety of techniques, often when I was locked up reading or sleeping.

We spent the rest of the day sparring and training—all three of us. I had decided that I would be the one to fight, but if I died Axten and Eliron would have to defend themselves. The sun set and we had another night of rest before Hiblon returned.

They came at dawn on the next day, jogging across the sand with the sun flashing off of their carapace armor. Axten had shut down, and Eliron was sleeping, so I was the first to see them. At least fifty, probably more. I lightly kicked Axten, and he turned himself on. A single glance out the cave entrance gave him all the information he needed. "I'll wake the human," he said, scuttling away.

I picked up my sword and held it clenched in one fist. I almost thought I could see Hiblon, a lone speck of pale white among the black Mgas. Blades were gleaming among them.

Eliron stumbled up to my side, blinking his eyes. "You're sure we shouldn't just use our guns?" I asked him. "We've got enough ammo between us to kill fifty."

"Maybe if they come charging up in one mass, but they won't, not once you start shooting at them. The Mgas are cunning, Flinteye. They'll find ways to make you waste your shots, and wear down your energy until they can sneak up and kill you."

"Should we go down to meet them?"

"Yes. It is crucial to give every appearance of honor, for this. They may not even accept such a challenge from an off-worlder."

Loaded up with weapons, and carrying a skin of water each, we went down the rocky steps of the tor just as the Mgas war band arrived. Hiblon was leading from the rear, with Nolthel hovering at his side. Almost all of the natives were sheathed in armor, with animal hide shields and iron weapons.

They stopped a few feet in front of us and parted to let Hiblon and Nolthel come forward. The white-faced human was smiling grimly. "Flinteye. Axten. Eliron. Any last words, or should I have my warriors cut you to pieces now?"

I ignored him and spoke to the natives. Eliron had told me what words to say, and I repeated them exactly. "I claim the right of life-duel!" I roared into Eliron's translator.

At that, the Mgas warriors stiffened. Hiblon frowned. I went on. "A war band comes against three. There would be little honor in slaughtering us like this. Show me the best warriors among you, and I will kill them for my life and the lives of my friends."

There was a pause, a long one. Then, the Mgas laughed, their yellow eyes genuinely mirthful. Hiblon's expression was hanging between anger, confusion, and amusement.

The laughter faded when the Mgas saw the serious expression of my face. One of them asked, "You do not joke with us, off-worlder?"

"I do not."

The one who had spoken, an enormous native a little taller than I was, turned back to his comrades and consulted quietly with them for a while. Hiblon's expression slipped towards anger. The big one spoke again, "Your challenge is accepted. Whose life will you defend?"

Hiblon exploded. "What are you doing?" he raged, almost forgetting to speak into his translator. "I brought you here to kill him!"

The Mgas warrior gave Hiblon a long, slow look. "I still intend to. But they are three, against an entire war band of men better armored and better trained than they are. It would be an affront to honor to massacre them all together."

Hiblon clenched his teeth. Nolthel looked almost as angry. The big Mgas leaned close to them and said, "I have accepted this off-worlder's challenge. Do not interfere, or we will kill you."

Then, he asked me again: "Whose life will you defend first?"

"This one," I said, pointing to Eliron. He took it in stride, although we hadn't decided beforehand.

"Very well. Sandeater! You will kill him."

The summoned warrior advanced to stand beside his leader. He had full carapace armor, I was only wearing filthy and torn pants and a vest of black material. I handed my plasma pistols to Axten. My sword came out with a rattle and a hiss. I took my stance and waited for Sandeater to attack.

He swung his sword up high, roaring wildly, and pounded towards me, kicking up a cloud of sand. As his sword began to fall, I back-stepped just out of its range and felt the point sweep by centimeters away from my fur. I slashed at his side. His shield split and my sword cracked through armor and lodged in his ribs. He screamed, bringing his sword up to swing at me again,

but I moved faster. The point of my blade snapped through his carapace armor and pierced his heart.

He dropped, his blood flowing onto the sand. I left my sword un-wiped. The leading warrior, his face painted with surprise, said, "The life of the off-worlder is saved, by the death of Sandeater."

"Him next," I said, pointing to Axten.

Hiblon's face flushed red once more. "Stop this! Hardiron, have your warriors kill them, or you will be paid nothing."

Hardiron got mad now. "Sandeater is dead already. Whether my warriors can defeat the black-eyed off-worlder or not, you will pay the price you promised. We could still kill you, human, and I am not sure if you have enough honor in you to be granted the right of life-duel."

Hiblon didn't answer, but his hand went for his plasma pistol. Hardiron raised his sword, and two pairs of warriors seized both Hiblon and Nolthel. The Mgas' voice was cold when he spoke in the translator that Hiblon still held. "Restrain yourself, off-worlder. That one is saved, by the strength of the black-eyed, and none of my warriors will touch him unless in self-defense. We will kill you if you interfere further."

Hardiron turned back to me and repeated, "The life of the light-skinned is saved. Whose will you fight for next?"

I pointed to Axten. "I can fight for myself, Jalazar," he said.

I glared at him, and he shut up.

Hardiron pulled three warriors out of the ranks this time, all of them big. Two had broadswords, and the other had a heavy-bladed polearm. Unlike Sandeater, their faces were dour. I had shown them that I was at least competent with a sword, and that I could kill Mgas.

The first swordsman came at me in a solid stance, using his shield correctly, hiding behind it. His sword was held back to defend, making small circles in the air. He was afraid. Sandeater must have been a well-respected warrior.

I stepped forward, striking twice in quick succession. The Mgas blocked both attacks. I chopped at his skull, and he deflected the blow with his sword. His weapon raked across my ribs. I growled and fell back into my stance once again.

Then he got more confident. His shield dipped down a few centimeters to give his sword more room to swing. I parried his strokes, falling more into a defensive fight, and my opponent started to get cocky.

I did what he didn't expect. I dropped my guard, ducked under his slash, and ran past him. My sword cut open his neck as I went by, slitting his throat and spine in one stroke.

His corpse collapsed. Two warriors broke from the war-band and dragged it away, leaving an open stretch of bloodstained sand between me and the next swordsman.

This one was more skilled than the last, and had a stronger mind. He moved in boldly, without hesitation. I had earned their respect well, and he was treating me as he would any skilled Mgas swordsman. I had never known that my Ima-han training would be so useful. I would have to take it up again when I got back to the *Flint Shard*.

I was tiring, but I killed him quickly, although he added another scrape to the ones I had already collected on Polod. Then there was only the axeman, and killing him would save Axten.

It took me three seconds to tell that Mgas polearm fighting wasn't related to their sword style. The way he used the axe was quick, energetic, and powerful, with sweeping strokes and lunging thrusts. He put me on the defensive almost immediately. My sword shook when his axe blade hammered into it, sending sparks into the hot desert air. The warrior's chitin plates

slid easily over his muscles and against each other. I fought hard, but I was tiring—sweat and blood stained my fur. The sword in my hands was getting heavier with every stroke. Its leather wrapped grip scraped at my hands. My legs and arms ached.

It was too heavy, too slow. I threw the sword aside, and the point stuck in the sand. That was enough to make the Mgas pause, and during that time I drew my dagger and closed with him. I still had enough strength to pin his spear against his chest and slash his unarmored throat. I kicked his body down and swept up my sword from the ground.

Hardiron's expression was alarmed. His teeth were clenched, his forehead was knotted, and his hands were rolled into fists. "By the blood of Bonebiter, Suncaller, and Rockjaw, the silver off-worlder's life is saved by the sword of the black-eyed."

A moment passed, and then Nolthel howled. It sounded like a volcano erupting, and he opened his throat so wide that I could almost see his most recent allotment of ration bars sloshing in his belly. His frill stretched until it seemed like it would snap and his silver eyes bulged wildly. There weren't any words, but I could guess what they would have been if he had gained enough control to say them. One of the Mgas hit Nolthel in the face, and he shut himself up. But his eyes glared at me with some of the deepest anger I had ever seen.

"You will defend yourself, off-worlder?"

Eliron held out his translator again and I started to say something, but Axten got his say in before me. "I will fight for the life of the black-eyed, against whatever opponents you give me."

I turned, growling. "Jalazar, you are exhausted," he said, "They will send several warriors to kill you this time, and you will not be able to defeat them."

I nodded, realizing how tired I was. I stumbled back and sank down onto the sand, no longer caring how hot it was. I almost had to pry my hands off of my sword with my teeth. Axten had the other sword in his hands and was standing between me and the Mgas war band, legs splayed out in a posture I didn't recognize. "I will fight for the life of the black-eyed," said Axten once more.

"It is good for friends to lay down their lives for friends," said Hardiron. "Who will face the silver one?"

I still had the translator, tuned to a very high sensitivity, but it was able to pick up and translate the answer—from Nolthel. "Allow me, Hardiron," he said, never taking his eyes away from Axten.

The Mgas turned angrily. "You? This life-duel is between them and the Mgas. You have no part in it."

"I will fight him. I will honor your custom, but I must kill him," grated Nolthel.

Hardiron opened his mouth to refuse Nolthel's request, but Axten said, "Let him fight me. The black-eyed one's life will be forfeit if he kills me, and if I kill him I will have defended the black-eyed one's life."

Hardiron's eyes narrowed. "Are you a skilled warrior?" he asked Nolthel.

"I am," growled Nolthel. "Good enough to kill that junk heap of a 'bot."

"Very well. Wormleg! Give him your weapon."

The warrior stepped forward and handed Nolthel a broadsword almost identical to Axten's. Nolthel swung it experimentally and assumed a stance fluidly—he had sword training too.

Their swords clashed together twice. Nolthel attacked, and Axten backpedaled. I was almost too tired to keep track of the fight, but I made an effort. My friend and companion for years was risking death for me, against a being who had wanted to kill him since they had first

met. Eliron was concerned, but his life was already secure, and he had met Axten only a couple days ago.

Nolthel clipped Axten's side, and the chromeel split apart a little. Nolthel bared his teeth in a feral grin and pressed the attack. Axten continued to defend, moving away from Nolthel constantly.

But my 'bot didn't take any more wounds, and the fight dragged. Nolthel was tiring fast, and only rage at Axten's existence let him keep attacking with such force. I watched, a smile creeping across my face, as Axten slowly began to attack. His parries turned into counter-strokes as he thrust and slashed offensively. Soon, after many long minutes of fighting, Nolthel was the one moving backwards. His gray skin glistened with sweat. Axten's power core was being taxed to its limits, but it was still going.

He began to talk, just as his blade scraped against Nolthel's shoulder plate. "You've wanted to kill me since Lewiod, Nolthel."

A thrust came within a centimeter of the gray-skinned assassin's neck. "You tried to kill me once on this world, at the village right past the Io-losh. You almost slit Jalazar's throat before that."

I had switched the translator off, so the Mgas couldn't hear what he was saying. Nolthel tried a desperate slash at Axten's legs that would probably have gotten past me, but Axten blocked it smoothly and forced Nolthel to retreat. "You've wanted to kill Jalazar and I all through this journey, and before it."

He swept his sword up high and brought it down on Nolthel's with a crash. The blade almost slipped from Nolthel's grip, and he fell to his knees. I could see fear on his face.

"But it never occurred to you that, even if you had the chance...," Axten hissed, slapping Nolthel's sword aside, "that you wouldn't be able to do it. That it was I who would kill you."

Axten halved Nolthel's skull with an overhand chop that he put all his motor power into. The head fan was squelched beneath the heavy iron blade. Axten jerked the sword free, red and gore-stained. Nolthel's body fell to the sand, his last expression one of terror. At least the Mgas had died looking noble.

Hardiron said, slowly, "The life of the black-eyed is saved. Your lives are all saved, and neither I nor my warriors will do you any harm, or assist in such harm being done."

He turned to Hiblon. "Come, off-worlder. We have failed, but you will still give us our payment."

With his eyes fixed on Nolthel's body, and on Axten's gore-stained sword, Hiblon nodded. The life seemed to have drained out of him, and he didn't even try to draw his plasma pistol. I took my weapons back from Eliron and buckled them on, while Axten picked up his ion rifle and slug gun once more.

We said goodbye to Eliron. We needed to get a couple of the airbikes for our return to the *Flint Shard*, and Eliron had decided to stay on Polod. The desert world had some appeal—or so he said. I didn't think it would become an Alliance tourist trap. He thanked us and gave us a data tube, which he told us to get to the Patrol—an object that would reveal the wrongdoings of Eliron's boss. He hadn't been able to get it to the Patrol himself with bounty hunters on his trail all the time, and had fled to Polod to wait until things had cooled down. In exchange for the service, he gave us the swords we had used that day.

We took some food and started to walk back to the Mgas city. We left Nolthel's body where it had fallen, to be eaten by scavengers and buried by the sand.

Hiblon would have tried to take all four bikes, but the Mgas stopped him. Two of them went to us. Axten and I returned to our ship after a few days journey, getting through the Io-losh pass without trouble. We left the bikes outside Hiblon's ship, which was still where it had landed. I never saw the human again—either he lifted off after we left, or he died somewhere in Polod's deserts.

The cool interior of the *Flint Shard* felt very good indeed after the desert. Axten took the co-pilot's chair and ran through the lift-off sequence, and we rose up through Polod's atmosphere and into the vacuum of space. The planet's brown surface, with a belt of red and black around the equator and vast oceans of blue at the poles, stretched out below us, and all around the stars shimmered coldly. The canopy darkened itself so that we weren't blinded by the system's sun.

"Axten," I said, "did you have anything in mind as to how we should spend our SEUs?"

He patched into the Grid and ran a quick search. "There's going to be a big weapons show not far from here. Open to any of the public who can pay the entrance fee."

"Alliance run?"

"No. Hreeq Consortium. We're right on the edges of their space, remember?"

I didn't visit them often, and I was almost sure that there were no major bounties being offered for my head there. "Alright, let's go. Let's pick up a few swords, shall we? I think I'll take fencing up again. If nothing else, it'll be a good way to pass the time."

Axten punched in the coordinates. "I'll beat you."

I grinned. "I'm sure you will. Where's the nearest Patrol station?"

"There's a Stellar Navy base just before Hreeq space begins. Is that good enough?"

"Yes. We'll slap a beacon on the data, jettison it, and let them take care of it. It'll get to the Patrol, and they'll do something about it."

Axten fired up the *Shard*'s engines, and we went off into the galaxy.

The End

Sean T. M. Stiennon is a high school student who has been writing for over three years. He has no publications outside of Deep Magic but is actively looking to change that. He has written several other stories about Flinteye and is planning more and at least one novel. Visit his website at http://flinttower.proboards15.com to discuss his work and a variety of other topics.

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offender.

"A word with you, Missy Grove."

The voice at her shoulder startled her, but she recognized Bandimas' voice. It never failed to cause a sick feeling in her stomach.

She turned, coldly, and faced the silver-haired priest. "I am already late. Another time, father?"

"It won't take long, Missy Grove. Abide a moment." His eyes were hard, his mouth turned down in a look of disgust and hostility. She knew he had hated her ever since she had won the Arch-Rike's favor. He could convey that sentiment with little more than a raised eyebrow.

"I promised to meet my brothers, father. I will seek you out when I return." Why did he never make anything easy for her!

"Obedience, daughter. That is paramount. It won't take but a moment."

"Fulfilling a promise is important as well. I beg your leave. And I promise you I will return shortly."

"I expect it. You may go." The look in his eyes promised retribution.

Leaving his presence, she could hardly shake the chilling feeling of his company. He had several stray whiskers that sprouted from a mole on his cheek that revolted her somehow. The flabby flesh of his throat, the polished fingernails that were cut fastidiously, the smell of onion on his breath. It was all of these things that made her despise him. Yet he was the elder priest, the father, as designated by Seitherell. And so she was forced to endure him.

She crossed the outer courtyard of the church's towers and gazed up at the soaring buttresses and spires of the construction. It was difficult to believe she would be alive when the Temple was finally finished. There would probably be a little gray in her hair by then, instead of the dyed blond she had been fond of lately. Anything to hide the ugly red tresses that impelled many to gawk and whisper behind their hands.

When Missy reached the orphanage gates, she saw Pin first, demonstrating to Ty how to hold a sword. A spasm of dread went through her. That was the last thing Tyrus needed to learn.

Almost as soon as the thought came, Ty looked up, seeing her beyond the gate.

"It's Missy!"

The grin on his face melted her heart.

"I doubted you'd show up today," Pin said, his eyes accusing.

"I came, didn't I?" She hated that he was taller than her now.

He tried twice to sheathe the sword in his belt scabbard, missing both times and nearly nicked his finger as he tried to guide it in. The lad was still clumsy!

Ty gave her a hug around the middle. He would be tall too. Already he had a certain brawniness about his shoulders that reminded her of father. "Missy, do you know what I did to Seppan during catechism class?"

"I don't want to hear it," she said, stifling a moan.

"Tell me," Pin said, giving her a scolding look.

Ty needed very little prompting. "The priest had put all of us half asleep. I saw Seppan dozing, having trouble keeping himself awake. Father Konimas is the worst. And his breath is like a roach mincemeat pie."

"They must serve that a lot here," Pin joked. "Roach mincemeat pie."

"Let me finish, Pin. So Father Konimas asked one of his long questions. And he waits for an answer. He will wait until the Plague comes if no one answers him. And he'll just pace there, staring from one of us to another. So Seppan is dead asleep, so I nudge him and tell him that

Father Konimas just asked him to say the benedictory prayer."

"You didn't! And he believed you?" Pin guffawed.

Missy went scarlet. "Ty!"

"Of course he believed me. Konimas was staring right at us because he saw me whispering. Seppan thought he was the one getting stared at, so he apologized, stood up, and said the dismissing prayer. You should have seen their faces, Missy!"

"Look at Missy's. She's blushing like she's the one who was tricked. Look at that pendant. It's pretty, Missy. Where did you get it?" He fingered the blue-silver locket dangling from a chain around her neck. "How much did it cost?"

"It was a gift. It was…it was from a dwarven silversmith in Alkire."

"A dwarven smith? It's very nice. Very fetching. Who gave it to you?"

"It was a gift, Pin."

"The Arch-Rike gave it to you? He did, didn't he?"

"Let it go, Pin," Ty said. "He brings me gifts too. He's very generous."

"He's very *old*," Pin sneered.

Missy bit her lip, angry at her brother. Yes, the Arch-Rike had given her many gifts. A headdress from Boeotia, a stone charmed with light that never dimmed. Little gifts, or large gifts. Ty was right—he was a generous man to all.

"And what does it matter how old he is?" Missy asked, her face heated.

"He's as old as father, Missy."

"And what does that mean, Pin? He's the Arch-Rike. He's Seitherell's agent here in the world. He's Seitherell's voice. I don't think he would give that up to…to court me."

"He's already wedded to the Temple. I saw him walking the battlements, back when I was holding chisels and getting blisters on my hands. He's obsessed with it, Missy. He's an obsessive man. But he's a man, Missy. A man."

"Like you," she said, glaring at him. "Are you saying he's like you then? Is that why you're trying to warn me? You flatter yourself."

Pin snorted. "I've seen the way he looks at you, Missy. Those aren't priest's eyes that I see."

Ty knotted his eyebrows, but said nothing.

"You don't know what you're saying, Pin. You never have."

"And you're blind, Missy. Enjoy the afternoon." He started away.

"Pin!" Ty shouted, but he waved them both away and kept sulking as he walked away.

Missy brought herself down to Tyrus' height, not caring that her skirts dragged on the street. She tried to smooth his unruly red hair and failed.

"Why do you argue so much?" Ty whispered.

"When haven't we?" she said, meaning it for herself. Pin had always frustrated her. She loved him. But he frustrated her. She took Ty's hands and squeezed them. "Let's go for a walk. I want to hear about your studies."

"I can scribe now, Missy. Three languages."

"Three? I'm impressed. What is the elvish word for midday meal?"

"They don't eat a mid-day meal. It's *varnoth* or *varnai*. They only eat two meals each day."

She smiled at him, her heart swelling with pride. She rumpled his hair.

"I hate it when you do that, Missy."

"I know. That's why I keep doing it." She kissed him on the cheek, knowing he hated that as well. But also knowing he needed it more than he hated it.

* * *

"You wished to see me, father?"

A dish of incense burning from a polished stand invoked a tendril of orange smoke in the corner of Bandimas' personal chambers. Over-stuffed couches with carved wooden feet and façades dominated the near corners, while towering bookshelves shielded behind glass mocked the walls that held the single window, heavily curtained with sagging velvet and gold-threaded tassels. A far door led to his bedchamber, his changing rooms, and other shadowed lairs she could only guess at.

Bandimas wore the white alb and black cope of his order, with the stole of his office draped over his shoulders, the gems sewn in glittering in the lamplight that haloed his silver hair and darkened the grooves in his craggy face. He raised his hand, flaunting the huge black ring on his middle finger. She bent her face and brushed it with a kiss; her stomach revolted at the touch.

"Do you know why we kiss the ring, Missy Grove?"

"Yes."

"Tell me."

"To remind us never to utter a falsehood in the presence of a priest of Seitherell."

"I am so pleased you know the catechism." He wriggled the ring off his finger. Then offered it to her.

She stared at it as if it were a scorpion.

"Take it."

"I don't under…"

"Take it! Put it on the middle finger of your right hand."

She obeyed and felt something warm fill her chest when it passed the threshold of her knuckle. He snatched her hand and kissed the ring himself. The sight of his lips near her skin made her sick.

He opened a worn leather volume on his desk. Tenderly, he turned several pages to where a gleaming satin ribbon waited. He leaned forward, poring over the page, his finger hovering over the blots of ink. "I found this and thought of you, Missy Grove. I knew you would be interested in it."

The ring flared on her hand, pulsing with warmth.

"Ah, here we are. This is a book from a wizard in Wayland known as Catuvolcis. I think his real name was Crumpensall—not nearly as majestic, but wizards tend to be vain. This is a book of his journeys. He described his many wanderings, his confrontations with beings of the dark or aberrations of nature. Nockwhils, keebuls, grindlings."

"I'm not all that interested in forest lore," Missy said, wondering how she was going to leave without offending him.

"This is the entry I wanted to introduce you to. Let me read it for you. '*In the woods and mountains west of Wayland dwells a tiny kingdom called Stonehollow. They have living among them a race who cannot be harmed by the Great Plague.*'" He looked up at her expectantly.

Missy's heart trembled, but she kept her expression disinterested. "Do they now?"

"Let me continue. *'My first encounter with the souls of Stonehollow was horrific. They are a reclusive folk by nature—mistrusting, suspicious. I have my doubts that everything they told me was true, but they certainly act as if wholly convinced. This race appears as human as any Waylander. They are often mistaken for wizards because they can summon fire into their hands*

and use it to harm others. When interviewed, I discovered that they are similar to the wizarding order in many ways. Certain words and gestures allow them to summon the magic. These gestures and signs are secret, known only to those of this race. Some say the origin is elvish, that they are half-breeds from the elven people. Many grow their hair longer to hide features that would mark them as elven-born. Curiously, the majority of this race have red hair.'"

Bandimas looked up at her again, his eyes piercing her. "An interesting tale, is it not, Missy Grove? But it gets more interesting still. I'm sure you are well versed in the lore of your homeland. I find this rather fascinating. Don't you?"

She swallowed, struggling with the constricting feelings surging in her chest. He already knew what she was. He had known—or suspected—for years. Why had he chosen to reveal it now? She believed the Arch-Rike's favor had shielded her all this time. Though she was going to say she was bored by the report, other words spilled out of her mouth instead. "These tales are brutal and they disgust me. They always have."

What had possessed her to say that?

The ring pulsed warm on her hand and she wrestled it off and slammed it on the table in front of him.

A creased smile full of mockery met her. "I'm not finished. Listen on. *'This race is hated in Stonehollow. I learned that in the distant past, they used their immunity from the Plague to enrich themselves and their fellows. In places where the Plague destroyed entire villages, save their own kind, they inherited the wealth abandoned by their dead neighbors. They rose to thrones, principalities, and increased their dominion through deception and flattering words. In addition to calling fire into their hands, they are quick to learn and master skills, especially the skills of persuasion. This invoked jealousy, for men always distrust those wiser than they. And when it was eventually discovered that it was their blood that made them immune to the Plague, the people of Stonehollow rose up against them when the seasons of Plague came. I watched this myself. A rumor of Plague came from the north. A rumor that turned out to be false. But a woman, red-haired and young, was dragged to a pillory in the center of town. They cut her with knives and collected her blood, which they brushed on the lintels of their homes. Many homes, they claimed, had been spared from the Plague in the past by so doing. Thus one death could save an entire village. The folk of Stonehollow do not consider this murder. No one would give me the name of this race. And no one with this blood willingly admits it."*

Bandimas reverently closed the book, his hands stroking the edge of the leather cover.

She didn't know what to say.

"How much of it is true, Missy Grove?"

"What do you want from me?" she whispered, her insides turning to ice. Her heart hammered and she unwillingly thought the words that summoned the fire in case he attacked her. There was something in his eyes, something that told her he would.

"Nothing you have not already given us. Your complete and unswerving service to Seitherell. Even a pagan barbarian can be converted to the truth. Even a heretic may disavow and recant. Continue to serve, and this knowledge will remain as it has. Hidden to history. Catuvolcis lived two hundred years ago. But his story is ageless. I doubt…I truly doubt there are many of you left. Are there?"

She knew she could not lie to him. "I don't really know," she whispered.

He leaned forward and stood shakily, wincing with the effort. He planted his palms on the table, one resting on the book. "You have risen fast in the Arch-Rike's favor, Missy Grove. You came here without ten pents to your name. You've cared and sheltered two brothers, translated

and scribed scores of books. You have a soft tower all to yourself while other maids your age practically live in soldier barracks instead of their cells. All along you have had your eye on the Arch-Rike, have been bending him to your will with your demure refusals of his attentions. You distract him, Missy Grove." His face looked as hard as stone. "You distract him from his work of building the Temple. His thoughts stray to you constantly. How many times I've heard him mutter, 'she would care for this' while examining a ream of fabric, or 'I think she would like this' when gazing at Alkiran workmanship. You wish to leash the Arch-Rike. A leash gripped by your hand. I've seen it, Missy Grove. I've watched you wheedle your way into his affections. If you make him yours, then alone you can stop the persecution of your people."

Her pulse throbbed painfully in her temples. Anger—bottled anger like nothing she had experienced before stormed inside her.

"These are accusations without any shard of truth. You are saying I've been disingenuous. That I have motives here other than what I have been taught and trained. Put on your ring, father. Let me speak the truth."

"I do not need a ring to know the truth, child. I see it in your eyes. You may have stained your hair, but you cannot purge the stain in your soul. I know more than this simple record. I know that your kind waxes powerful. Very powerful. I have heard reports that you are strong in the magics already. Stronger than many of the wizards of Wayland. And so young! What curse is it that gives you such unnatural insights? Such a keen intellect? That you could take the most holy man and subvert him so easily?"

"I've done nothing."

"Which has only inflamed him more!"

What to do? What could she do? Every part of her life was sheltered and now the cracks and rips threatened to destroy the foundation she'd fought so hard to build. She could flee Kenatos, but go where? And would they even let her leave? Did Bandimas know that the Arch-Rike himself was of her race? His words made her think that he did not. For in truth, had not the Arch-Rike done exactly what she was being accused of? Had he not seduced the city with his visions and piety as he had seduced her spirit with his kindness, his thoughtfulness, his compassion? He was the most driven, compassionate person she had ever known. She respected him as much as she was inspired by him. Anyone who had known him long was well acquainted with his charms. Something about his smile, the flush on his face from climbing tower steps and visiting the furthest scaffolds of the temple construction—he had made her feel that her work was something bigger than herself. Bigger even than the pull of her family.

"What do you fear, Missy Grove? Do you think if you silence me, the knowledge dies with me?"

Of course he would suspect that. "What do you…" She swallowed, unable to speak past the thickness in her throat. "What do you want from me?"

"I've already told you. I want your unswerving loyalty to Seitherell."

"And what must I do to prove that?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Now we come to it. You are as wise as they say. You choose to survive. For now, do nothing. Say nothing, especially to the Arch-Rike. His Temple is not yet constructed. He must not lose focus on it. But the Temple will have many doorways." His voice grew husky. "And many, many lintels. The…service of your family will be recorded in the histories of Kenatos. In a very real way, your family may redeem your race. Whatever it is called. Go. And tell no one."

* * *

Missy waved her hand over the doorknobs and released the spell. She was dizzy with worry, sick to her stomach, and frightened. No, it was worse than simply being frightened. Night had settled over the city and the shadows stalked her as she hastily mounted the steps to her chamber. What she craved more than anything was a secret meeting with the Arch-Rike. Surely he would know what to do. Surely his wisdom was greater than hers for he had lived all his life dodging the fear, keeping his past a secret. She ground her teeth and nearly surrendered to tears, but she could not. The thought of little Tyrus—even Pin—suffering an ignominious death revolted her. A shudder passed through her. No, she would not stand still, waiting for the executioner's ax to fall. Bandimas had warned her. Why? Why had he revealed his knowledge? Or was he reacting to knowledge she was unaware of? Perhaps the Arch-Rike had confessed his love. Her heart spasmed and a blush rose to her cheeks. Was he willing to step down as Arch-Rike? Abandon the Temple that he pursued with such single-mindedness for so many years? How could she let him do that?

And what did it matter? There was only one thing to do, one course of action to take. She had to disappear. Perhaps seek the druids and shelter with them. Havenrook? Impossible. Then a thought pierced her like sunlight. What of Silvandom? What if they sought refuge among the elves?

The thought gave her courage. She finished mounting the steps and crossed the threshold to her chambers where the stone still shone atop a black velvet bag she used to smother its light. She had left the window open. Hadn't she? The chambers were stifling hot. First, she gathered some money in a purse. Next, jewelry that the Arch-Rike had given her. That could be sold. Books? Should she bring any books? That was forbidden—no book was ever allowed to leave Kenatos. She hesitated and then took three books of magic that she had copied for herself.

Clutching the books in her arms, the weight of the loss struck her. There were books she would never read. Languages she would never discover. So many times she had grumbled when her fingers and hands hurt from scrawling, copying letters from one book to another. She would miss the books terribly. Wet gouts of anger hissed inside her. Yet the sense of panic and urgency made her shunt the feelings aside and hurry to the bed chamber.

Rummaging through her closet, she found the worn leather pack that she had brought to Kenatos so many years ago. The straps were bleached bone in color, scarred and stiff from being stuffed in a corner so long. She loaded her purse, the three books, and stuffed a cloak in on top.

What to wear for a long journey? Her clothes were more refined now. Gowns and skirts were arrayed on wooden pegs. She had no sturdy boots, no flint and tinder to make…well, she didn't really need those to make a fire. Her fingers trembled as she started unlacing her bodice strings.

She realized someone was in the room, watching her.

Missy turned slowly, her fingers frozen on the small black threaded knots. No one. *Pyricanthas. Sericanthas. Thas.* As her mind formed the words, blue light came from her fingertips.

Something, someone big and heavy, rushed past her into the hall.

The anger burst and gushed out.

A globe of fire sprang to life in her hand and sailed down the hall, striking something solid, something unseen. The fire spread, setting afire a cloak. Already she was working four other spells. The door to the stairs rooted in place, wedging itself firmly—it would take a dozen men with axes to burst through it. Another spell silenced the room, save for her curt breaths.

The blazing cloak fell away, discarded by the intruder. A thief? The person was still invisible.

Missy advanced down the corridor, her hands clutching flames. The doorknob rattled once, twice, and Missy loosed another searing hull of flame. It exploded when it struck the door, and she saw the man outlined by a wreath of fire. The man's arm jerked back and a dagger sailed at her chest.

A glance was all it took to send the weapon spinning away. More spells jammed in her mind, flooding her with raw power. It was delicious. She caught the intruder with a mental shove and sent him crashing into the far wall. He reeled, dropped low and lunged at her, another blade in his hand. Gritting her teeth, she slammed him again, but instead of dropping unconscious, he recoiled and came at her again, more intent. She shattered the window with her mind and the shards sprayed the intruder.

That stopped him.

He lay bleeding, knife-like shards of glass protruding from his back, neck, and arms. Her feelings surprised her. Instead of horror at what she had done, she was relieved, even proud. No nausea or shock. Quite the contrary. She stuffed the feelings aside, not wishing to dwell on how easily she had killed a man. It took several moments to calm the fire in her hands. Then closing her eyes, she passed her palm over his body and found the magic coming from his hands. One was a ring. She twisted it from his finger and studied it, seeing in her mind's eye the intricacies of a spell that made him vanish. Seeing it once was all she needed. Not only would she be able to duplicate the effect, she saw how it could be unraveled as well. The other ring was a bracelet that had enhanced his quickness and reflexes. She pocketed that one for Pin. Turning the man over, she saw his vacant gaze. Again she searched him, for a *carnotha*, or a sign that revealed his allegiance.

She found it as a tattoo on his back.

* * *

They disappeared from Kenatos.

Ty had been waiting for her, his gray eyes wide and fearful. Pin was drunk, but strong enough to walk. She despaired that he would ever choose to be sober. They packed nothing, but Missy did not care. This was different than leaving Stonehollow all those years ago. Before, she had hoped her scribing skills would be enough to find employment. The need for shelter was paramount back then—the need now was for anonymity. She knew they wouldn't starve. She trusted her magic, trusted it like a brother. If Bandimas sent another assassin after her, she would deal with him as she did the first. The assassin was not there to kill her. Merely to follow her. To see where she would go and possibly learn where others of her kind were skulking. Her only regret was not leaving an explanation for the Arch-Rike. She knew of no safe way to have done that. There would be no trail left to follow. Her magic would ensure it.

After crossing the lake, she had begged passage aboard a caravan heading west. She promised to pay well for their silence. Had Bandimas been expecting her flight? Were they being followed? Or had he assumed that living with so many comforts would make her dependent on them? Anyone who dared follow them would be dealt with.

"What are we doing here?" Pin asked with a croak in his voice. He tried to sit up, but collapsed.

"You were drunk," she said.

"I know that much. The room is spinning. I feel like I'm on a wagon."

"This is a wagon, stupid," Ty said, peering over the crate top at the wagon drivers, both brawny men—a father and son.

"Why am I on a wagon?"

The look on Ty's face nearly made her smile. "I already told you, Pin. I'll say more when we've gone our own way," Missy said.

"I hate it when you call me Pin."

"It's your name."

"I don't like it. People think I'm a seamstressssssh, or something. I want a better name."

"He's still drunk," Tyrus said, his lip curling. That someone so young could sneer like an adult surprised her.

"I'm not drunk! I'm thirsty though. Do you have any ale, Missy?"

"Not for you. Get some sleep." She invoked a little spell and he passed out again.

"I like that one," Ty said. "I could have used it on Gremmir when he snored."

She jerked her head at him. "What do you mean?"

"I saw how you did it, Missy. Like this, right?" A wave of deep drowsiness struck her, and she panicked a moment before unraveling the spell.

"Don't do that to me, Ty," she said, grabbing his wrist and squeezing it. "Don't use the magic unless I teach you." She glanced at the drivers.

"You can make them forget," Ty said, grinning. "That one's easy too."

"But it doesn't work all the time, Ty. Some people are good at fighting it. Some people, like the priests of Seitherell, are protected against it. Using magic is like learning to tie knots in a rope, like sailors do. You learn different knots depending on whether you need to fasten something down, or secure a sail. Anything. But you also need to learn how to untie those knots. Some are very tricky, Ty. Some are harder to loosen than they were to tie."

"Why?"

"Because that is the way of magic. Some knots can't be undone. They must be cut."

"Why?"

"Because there are some spells you never want broken. If I put a spell of strength on Pin's sword, would I want it unraveling while he was fighting a grindling?"

"Pin would need magic to fight a grindling."

"That's not nice, Ty."

"I would just call the flame. That's easier."

"But Pin can't do that, can he?"

"Why must we keep it secret, Missy?" he said, with a whisper this time.

"I'll tell you when we're alone. Too many ears may be listening."

"Show me another one, Missy. How would you make someone stronger?"

"That's easy," she said and showed him.

"I want to learn them all."

She smiled. "No one can learn them all. There are too many."

"I want to."

"You're just a boy, Ty. No one can learn them all. I've seen the shelves that hold all the books of magic. There are many, many, many spells. I can only show you the ones I know."

He was quiet for a while. "When I'm older, I'm going back to Kenatos."

* * *

The sprigs of kindling burst into flame and Tyrus' eyes widened, an impish grin on his face. "We could have made it bigger." Night descended quickly in the woods.

"No. Always start small. Remember, *Pyricanthas. Sericanthas. Thas.* What does *Pyricanthas* mean?"

"Fire-seed."

"Yes, like every flower that starts as a seed. Then a shoot. Then a flower. *Pyricanthas. Sericanthas. Thas.* If you started with *Thas*, you would not be able to control it. Now keep feeding it," Missy said. "Keep putting on larger sticks. Like that one. Good. Then when Pin gets back with bigger pieces, we can keep the fire burning all night. It gets cold in the woods at night."

"I've never slept in the woods before," Ty said, poking the fire. The smoke blew in his eyes and he winced and turned his face away, rubbing his eyes. "It stings!"

"That is what a real fire is like. And even worse, it makes your clothes stink."

"The fires in Kenatos aren't like this."

"That's because they have chimneys for the smoke, Ty." She dragged her cloak around her knees to keep the warmth in. "I haven't slept out of doors in many years. The last time was when you were a baby."

"So I *have* slept out of doors before."

"Yes, but you were very little." The memories came back in a rush. How terrified she had been. Barely twenty years old and responsible for her two little brothers. The pangs of missing father and mother would keep her awake at night. "Sometimes I'd wonder if we would freeze to death. It was so cold. Most nights, we slept under some leaves and I'd keep you and Pin tight against me to share our warmth."

A puzzled look came over Ty's face. He poked the fire with the stick and she noticed tears in his eyes. She said nothing.

Pin roamed in from the woods, cradling more firewood. "This will make a nice cooking fire," he said, dropping the pile nearby and collapsing near it. He took a hunk of wood and lobbed it on the fire.

The log hovered over the flame, wobbled, and then rolled backwards.

"Little ones first!" Ty hissed at him.

Pin stared at him, his mouth open a little. Like a fish. "You're turning into her? Ty, Ty! You don't want to do that. What could be worse than becoming an angry, conceited, neglecting nag. Don't be like her, Ty. Not even mother was like her."

"I'm surprised you even remember her," Missy said, her heart black with anger. He was so good with words. He used them like daggers.

"Perhaps I should blame her then," Pin said, snatching a stick and snapping it in half. "It's her fault we have this blood. That you two do at least. And it's my sin just being related to you."

"Not every child is born with it, Pin." Was every lad his age this disdaining?

"You're hateful," Tyrus whispered, his eyes red with tears and smoke.

"No, Ty. He's selfish."

"Selfish? That's a laugh, coming from you, Missy. You make us beg for every pent."

"You want more to waste on ale and silly girls? When you earn your own, squander them as you please."

Pin's gaze smoldered at her. He was silent, chewing on words instead of saying them. His jaw muscles clenched and a frown and snarl warred across his mouth. He snapped another stick and tossed it on the gasping fire. "You should have left me in Kenatos."

I was tempted to, she wanted to say. "And wait there until someone comes to kill you? Is that what you want, Pin?"

"I don't have your blood!"

"Does that even matter? Would Bandimas care that you've never summoned the fire? He would spill your blood anyway."

"You've made your enemies mine, Missy."

There were many things she could have said to that, but something in her mind warned her of an intruder.

"Someone's coming," Tyrus whispered.

Pin got to his feet, loosening the sword at his hip. Missy also stood, thinking of the different spells that came first to her mind, trying to control her anger but ready to use it as well. What kind of intruder? Another assassin? She watched him approach through the woods, walking deftly. He carried no magic but seemed filled with it.

"Who is it?" Pin shouted. "Show yourself!"

Missy clenched her jaw, wanting to swat him. Ty remained crouched by the fire, his eyes harrowed, but his chin held high.

The man looked up at them and his eyes were like two glowing coals in the twilight.

"Seitherell," Pin gasped.

But Missy recognized the omen. A Fyündular, though most folk called them Finders. They were dangerous.

"Pin, sit down," Missy said.

"What is it?"

"Sit down," she hissed at him. "I can do this without you."

"You don't have a sword, Missy."

"I don't need one. Sit down."

"No." He pitched his voice louder. "Stay where you are!"

A voice came from the shadowed figure as he continued the approach. "I ignored your first request because it was rudely spoken. I'll ignore your second for the same reason. Shut up, boy. I'm not deaf."

"Come join our fire," Missy said. "Such as it is. Pin, lower your sword. Now."

His grip on the hilt tightened, and his face flushed with the insult. "I'm not a…"

"You're a boy and a knave. Don't speak to your elders in such a way. Your backside deserves some bruises and I'll put them there myself if you open your mouth uninvited again. To the young lady, I thank you for your hospitality."

As he approached the rim of the firelight, she saw two pheasants tied at the ankles hanging off his shoulders. His bow was unstrung and hanging from a strap off his backpack. Whiskers liberal with gray filled his face, but the ones on his chin were bunched into two knots and tied off with bits of twine except for a bare patch under his lower lip. A scar ran along his left eyebrow and across his scalp. When he smiled at her, she saw a few missing teeth.

He approached unceremoniously, a good hand-width shorter than Pin and about eye-to-eye with her. Lanky but solid, dressed with soft clothes, dirty, with leather arm bracers, a leather collar, and boots that went higher than his knees. Squatting by the fire, he chafed his dirty hands and gave Ty a wink.

"A healthy fire you've started there, little master." He ran his hand through his long, tangled hair. "This will scare away the keebuls for sure tonight. Have you ever seen one?"

Ty shook his head.

"Quiet lad. I like that." He sat down and crossed his legs, adjusting his seat. "What's your name?"

Missy, alarmed, raised her hand to warn him, but Ty looked the Finder in the eye. "What's yours?"

"I'm Kinmon. I'm a Fyündular sent by the Arch-Rike of Kenatos. Yes, the Arch-Rike himself. And I'm looking for Missy Grove, a pretty lass with golden hair, and her brothers. Tyrus…a spirited little red-head, and Pin…a disrespectful youth." He looked up at Missy. "Sit down, lass. I'm not going to hurt you."

"How did you find us?" Missy asked, easing herself down slowly, ready to send the man spinning if he tried to harm any of them. She had heard these Finders were quick. Deadly as well.

"Does that really matter, lass?" He rubbed his nose. "Why don't I clean these two birds and we can eat first. I was sent to find you. I've done my part. The rest is up to you." He looked up at Pin who stood, arms folded, glaring at them. "Sharpen up that stick. The long one. It would make a good spit."

Pin scrambled with fear when the Fyündular heaved to his feet, his fist menacing. "I'll not ask you twice, lad! If I lesson you in manners, you'll like it not!"

Ty smirked while the man's back was turned, but when he came around, the smirk faded to wariness. Missy was sure her own expression was mirrored there.

The Fyündular then showed Ty and Pin how to fashion more sticks into spit forks which he hammered into the earth on each side of the budding fire. He worked slowly with the pheasants, and showed them how to strip the feathers away, where to tie the joints to keep it compact, and finally pierced both with the stick Pin had sharpened before resting it on the spit forks.

"If the spit forks are too high, the meat never cooks. Too low, and it ends up tasting like ash. Add some salt here like this, some dried bay leaves, sprinkle on a little coriander seeds. I found some wild onions earlier, but I'll add those to the coals later. When I give you lads a nod, you give the stick a turn and cook the other side."

Kinmon wiped his hands on his shirt and sat back, easing down on his elbows as if he had supped with them for years. The firelight showed all the wrinkles and crags in his weathered skin. Missy noticed that part of his ear was missing. He said nothing, just breathed in the night air.

"Why do your eyes glow?" Ty asked after an enormous void of voices.

"Because they do. Why does it have to matter *why* something is if it just is?"

"It matters to some," Missy said.

"She speaks again! A miracle. Seitherell be praised. Something's wrong when the Fyündular is the outspoken one." He muttered to himself a little more, but she could not catch the words.

"How did you find us?" Missy asked pointedly.

"And what does that question matter, lass?"

"It matters to me. When we left the caravan, none of them should have remembered us."

"None of them did. A clever trick, girl."

"So how did you find us?"

"I'd have to reveal a secret to tell you that. If I do, then you must as well."

She swallowed. "What do you want to know?"

"Do you love him?"

Her throat went dry.

"Don't pretend you don't understand me, girl. This is horrible, horrible! Rescuing you from Havenrook, I would prefer. Battling through an army of Boeotians, I could handle. Being a messenger like this…it's shameful. The Arch-Rike! Do you love him? How plainer can I say it?" He squirmed, as if the words were like weevils in his clothes.

A secret for a secret. It was an expensive secret. She rubbed her eyes, thinking frantically—cruelly aware of Pin's eyes on her.

"Either you do or you don't, lass. Say it."

"I'm not sure whether I should give you that answer."

Kinmon grimaced. "Even worse, she hasn't admitted it to herself yet. Even worse." He hung his head. "I'd rather eat worms than do this. Let me explain, lass, if it will help you decide. Broken glass and a dead man in your tower. Your money and jewelry missing. Several books as well. Scorch marks everywhere. Everyone is talking about it. Missy is missing. No one saw her go. Her brothers are gone too. Rumors…thousands of them. Abducted or escaped? It boils down to that. The Arch-Rike suspected abduction. When I looked at the wreckage, I thought escape. He's a wise man. He listened to me, despite his fear for your safety." He glanced at her brothers "Turn the spit, lads."

Ty and Pin obeyed instantly.

She stared at the Fyündular, waiting for him to continue.

"There is a hunt for you, Missy Grove. A hunt like no other in the history of Kenatos. Every cellar. Every boat. Every wagon. Every barrel. If you were abducted, he would have found you by now. No amount of coin would be spared. A queen's ransom. I'm sure the knaves of Havenrook have been plotting for years how to get their hands on you. But no. An abduction would have left a trail. Only a wizard could disappear like you did. And he knows that. And so the question tormenting him is why." He hawked and spat. "After this assignment, I'm going to retreat to the backwoods for a year. Horrible to have to say these words. By the Druids, what a task." He scratched his leg at the rim of his boot. "And so he wonders. He wonders if he was too forward with his feelings for you. Whether he drove you away. He loves you lass. Deeply and dearly. I've known him for years. I've labored for him for years. I've never seen him so hurt or so wretched. And so a secret for a secret. If you tell me whether your heart fancies the man, I will tell you how I found you."

He paused, let out a breath. "And by telling you, I'll probably not be able to find you again. For I must return to Kenatos with your answer. With all due haste. I either bring you with me, or I doom the man to suffer his pangs. What say you, Missy Grove? His feelings for you are genuine. This I heard him swear while wearing the ring."

Tears had stung her eyes, but she did not let them fall. In her mind she could see his face, his brown eyes piercing with concern and worry. She could imagine him pacing, pacing endlessly, unable to keep still. All that energy, all that boundless energy focused to building a temple. She brought in a quavering, quailing breath. "But he is the Arch-Rike of Kenatos. He…"

The Fyündular held up his hand. "That matters not. Give me your answer, not your excuses."

"I do." She bit her lip.

"What was that?"

"I do."

"Do what?"

Fury and pain and fire exploded inside her. "I love him, you dullard!"

A smile spread across the old Finder's mouth. "I guessed as much. Tangled, tangled, tangled. That's why I live alone. So why did you run, lass? You feared for your brothers? Of course you did. You've always put them first. As any mother would. He admires that in you. But what in Seitherell's name provoked you to leave? What threat? What reason to flee? Know you not that he would have defended you with the armies of Kenatos? He would have put his own life down before letting harm fall on you or your kin."

Something started to fall into place in her mind, like a peg restored to a block of wood. Her stomach shriveled.

"Bandimas. He threatened...he threatened my family."

"He told you to leave?"

"No," Missy said, shaking her head. Images of blood-spattered archways around the temple of Seitherell had blinded her to the truth. "No…he told me to stay. But to tell no one."

And thus provoke me to do the opposite. The thought sent a spasm of horror through her. If you wanted someone to flee, tighten your grasp on them. She had left Kenatos, careful to mask her trail, believing that Bandimas would try to stop her. He had wanted her to go. And by threatening to smear her brothers blood on the lintels…

"So it was Bandimas then," he said, his face puckering as if he'd eaten a sour apple.

"So how can I return? If Bandimas wanted me to flee, he would safeguard against me returning."

"He would try," the Finder said. "But the Arch-Rike is powerful. The most powerful man in Kenatos. And he gave me this, to prove his words true." He opened a pouch at his waist and produced the Arch-Rike's ring. She knew it by its markings, its Alkiran craftsmanship. So many times she had pressed her lips to it, then looked up into his eyes, hoping he couldn't see what was written in her heart. She took it, tenderly, and squeezed it in her palm. It was warm.

"We're going back?" Ty said, his eyes gleaming with hope.

Even Pin was staring, his face eager.

"Their safety," she said, staring at the Fyündular. "I'll risk my life, but not theirs. I must know it is safe before we return."

"Then let me share my secret. On the road to Kenatos, about a dozen leagues from the city, stand a pair of oak trees. A larger one and a smaller one. A dryad lives in one of them. The smaller one, I think. She saw you in the wagons as you passed by."

"A dryad?" Pin asked. "What is that?"

"Shy creatures, they are. Timid and shy. They only speak to druids or my kind for we protect them. I asked her about you when I left the city, and she told me which caravan you had left with. When I caught up to them and no one remembered, I backtracked to find where you had left the group during the night. There are many dryads in the woods. They do not roam like we do. They stay put. And they see everything. That's how I found you. If you think you'd like to come back to Kenatos, disguise yourself and wait by those oaks. I'll carry your news and meet you there. If it is safe—and only if it is safe—I'll send for you. Come back, Missy Grove. He loves you too."

The Finder looked at the scorched pheasants dripping from the spit. "Lads! Pay attention!"

* * *

Missy ran her hand over the rough bark of the oak, exploring the grooves in its skin. Tyrus slept on her cloak. Pin stared at the tree, searching its thorny branches and leaves for a glimpse

of the dryad.

"Do you think it's in there?" he asked, craning his neck.

"They're all *she's*, Pin. Dryads are only female."

"Then how do they…well…how do they…?"

"I think there's a reason why most druids are men," she replied and gave him an appraising look.

His eyes widened. "By Seitherell. Now that is motivation to become a druid!"

Thunder from hooves sounded from the road coming from Kenatos. "Stay still, Pin." She waved her arm, invoked the spell, and they vanished from sight.

A rider wearing the colors of Kenatos flew past them, skittering rocks and sending a plume of dust in its wake. The rider's face was panicked as if he were being pursued. Missy waited, searching for signs that didn't come. Kinmon had left them a short while ago. It would take him half the day to reach the Temple. They really shouldn't expect him until nightfall at the earliest. The oaks offered enough shade for them all.

Missy's heart burned. What was she going to say when she faced the Arch-Rike? Confessing her feelings to a taciturn Finder was one thing. But saying them aloud to someone she had secretly admired since arriving in Kenatos…that would take courage she didn't have. He was older than her. Pin had that right. But it did not matter to her in the least. She trusted him. She trusted in his wisdom.

A v-wing of pigeons or doves flapped overhead, heading south. She also saw some going west towards the elves in Silvandom.

Another horseman. This time, it was Kinmon. Something was wrong.

"Ty, wake up. Wake up!" She shook him.

Ty rubbed his eyes. "I was dreaming about her."

"Who?" Pin asked, giving him a playful shove.

Ty tapped the tree trunk.

"Really? What did she look like?"

"Quiet, both of you!"

Kinmon reined in, hard, and the horse neighed and reared. It slammed back down.

Missy unraveled the magic, her heart causing spasms in her chest. "What is it, Finder? What news? Is he dead?"

He shook his head, choking, then grabbed a flask from the saddle horn and gulped it down. "It's back, lass. They've shut the gates. Already the people trapped on this side of the lake are rioting. The gates are shut. They're letting no one in, and no one out."

"What? Why?" Pin shouted.

"The Plague, lad. The Plague is back! Seitherell save us! They've shut the gates until it is over."

* * *

Missy gripped Tyrus' hand, pulling him through the crowd that had gathered before the gates of Silvandom. The city proper rose on a bluff jutting into the bend of a placid river. There were many races assembled on the outskirts of the walls, and men and women with faces ravaged by tears warned them not to approach.

"You'll get turned away, lass. They'll not let anyone in."

Little Ty scowled, his hand like a stone in hers. He was angry. He'd been angry for days.

Ever since his hope of returning to Kenatos had been stolen.

Missy craned her neck, watching the silver pennants flap on the poles. As they approached the grounds, she saw the regimental colors of the elven army poised at the outer wall. Had some division of the elven army been stranded outside as well when news of the Plague struck?

One of the soldiers, a leader of sorts, watched her. He beckoned her to approach him.

"Good morrow, my lady. You fit a description that has been given to us. Do you carry a ring?"

Missy's throat was already hot from the long journey. She could hardly swallow, and her throat clenched at his words. She nodded, fishing in a pocket for the Arch-Rike's ring. She showed it to him.

"Are you Missy Grove?" he asked her.

"I am."

The soldier nodded, a look of determination on his face. "He sent birds before you, warning us you might come seeking shelter in Silvandom. He appealed on your behalf to Prince Nasla who bids you welcome to his manor house. He offers you his hospitality, to await the awful end of the Plague. You may dwell here until one year after the last victim has died and only if no new victims are reported. If you leave, you may not return."

"I thank you," Missy said.

Tyrus' hand felt limp.

The soldier scrutinized her. "We were told to expect two brothers as well. Where is the elder child?"

Something black scorched her heart. "He…he is not…he chose not to come."

* * *

In secret, early in the morning three days after their arrival in Silvandom, Missy used the magic to vanish so that she could wander the grounds unseen by any of the elven guards. Birds chirped with enthusiasm and a gentle wind shook the towering aspen and trimmed hedge works. Plates of slate formed walkways and side paths all around the hulking manor house, bedecked with ferns and lilies. Missy drew out a small knife and slit a wound on her wrist. Methodically, patiently, chewing her lip against the throbbing pain, she dabbed a rag from her bloodied wrist to each lintel until she had stained them all. The loss nearly made her faint.

But no one in the Prince's household died from the Plague that season.

The Plague lasted eight years.

The End

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her time, getting as much magic as she can until the day she can declare her own supremacy over every living thing."

The dog shifted slightly, pretended not to understand.

"No, we've got something better in mind, don't we? Something *poetic*."

He stood from his chair, stuffed the jar under his armpit, and then shuffled past Eighty-Eight and out of the room. Tomorrow he would begin in earnest his journey toward mortality and death.

* * *

Broady sat on the floor of his hut, his back against the jagged rock wall, his legs against his chest. Except for a small fire in the room's center, a mat in the corner, and a few small jars and vases lining a wall, the room was empty. The firelight made the walls glow a soft orange.

For a long time, Broady stared at the emptiness of the room. Until late into the night, he thought about how he had spent the years of his life. The days, the hours, the minutes. What did he have to show for it? Nothing but a one-room house with a dirt floor so hard it hurt to walk across.

The room had been empty for years. Forty-six years, to be precise—the time he'd observed and studied under that fat, lazy *pig* Edwin. For so long he had watched and learned, prepared and waited, worked to make himself someone worthy of receiving the blessing of magic and immortality. He had all the knowledge. He knew the words and gestures to hundreds of spells. He understood the required ingredients to defeat a demon, the pieces of a food necessary to duplicate the food, the timing of an incantation that would conjure an apparition capable of leveling armies. He'd seen Edwin do it all. He'd committed it to memory. He'd practiced in his empty hut.

And for what? What had it all availed him? Nothing. Like so many of Edwin's understudies, he had nothing to show for his poverty, toil, and dedication—and he might die that way. With each passing day it looked more likely that Edwin would not give him the magic. Edwin had never mentioned anything to Broady about it, despite the fact that the potion had festered in his laboratory for almost a year. And he wasn't the type to surprise Broady with an announcement and the drink.

"Tomorrow, Broady, I will start my transference fast and the day after I will cut out my tongue. In a few days you'll be drinking my magic, and you'll have all my power, won't you?"

No. Edwin would never do something like that. If he had planned on giving Broady his magic, he would have warned him a year ago to start preparing. Each day it looked more and more like he would deny Broady his rightful inheritance.

But Broady had waited too long, worked too hard, to die. If anyone ever had, he deserved the immortality that enough magic provided. He should not have to suffer because the random assigning of understudies to magicians had matched him with a selfish man.

He would not allow himself to be such a victim. No, he would not let fate treat him so cruelly. He would have the magic. After Edwin had deposited his powers into a container, he would have no magic, no voice to call for help when Broady descended upon him to steal the cup and drink its contents. And that's what Broady would do. No matter the cost, the violence, or the betrayal necessary, he would have the magic.

Quiet voices from outside, in the front of his hut, snapped his attention back to his surroundings. The fire had died. The ashes rested dark and cold, like the air in the room. A

soft gray light shone between the floor and the door. The voices came again, but this time from behind his hut. The hunting party leaving the village. Day approached.

Broady stood, his knees popping, his resolve thickening.

* * *

As the sun came up over the distant red-rock cliffs, Celeste scampered out of the light, into the spaces between a large pile of boulders and rocks. Her claws clicked and scratched on the stones. She found a comfortable spot in the shade that allowed a view of the adobe village—specifically of the largest hut. She took care to make sure that her tail kept out of sight. Carelessness had gotten that chopped off more times than she could remember.

The night had been so cool, so nice. Soon the heat of the day would beat down on her furry body like the brooms that had once broken her back. So many times the woman of a house had beaten her, tried to kill her. But magic had allowed her body to heal from about any wound. That was so long ago she almost couldn't remember, back even before she could talk.

She wasn't used to this climate, to the dryness and the temperature, the sand and the prickly cacti. She longed for the grassy northern countries where it actually snowed in the winter. She would be glad when, in a few days, she could begin her journey back.

She watched as the hunting party left the village on foot. Six men with spears and bows, and no fewer than ten dogs. It had taken her two mornings to learn that the hunting party always left through the north end of the village. Both days she had fled from a particular hound that must have had a keener sense of smell than the others. The dog had made such a fuss at the entrance of the hole in her rock that a few other dogs and a man had come to investigate. Only quick feet had allowed her to avoid detection.

Without moving, she waited throughout the morning, and watched as the village awoke and people emerged. Most were of only mild interest, a source of amusement and pity. As usual, Celeste derived the most pleasure out of the way the children tormented their mothers.

Around noon, when the majority of the villagers had gathered on the opposite side of the village for lunch, the door to the largest hut opened. A dog came out first, stopping after ten feet to look back. A man followed.

Celeste stood. That man had something she wanted.

* * *

Edwin left his hut when he knew very few people would see him. He greeted and waved to those who saw and acknowledged him, but did not go out of his way to draw any attention. In only a minute he had left the village, and in another five he had crested and started to descend a ridge that would have prevented him from seeing the village had he looked back.

For several hours he strode west, over the red dirt and rocks and through fields of sagebrush and cacti. Though he sweated in the heat and relentless sun, he never tired, slowed, or paused to reevaluate his direction. Neither did Eighty-Eight. Periodically, the dog would walk close enough to Edwin that his swinging hand would brush her back, but mostly Eighty-Eight ran ahead or lagged behind.

Shortly before sunset they stopped in the foothills of the dry mountains, at a river that flowed down out of the still snowy peaks. Nowhere else in the world had Edwin seen flowers, shrubs, and plants like those that lined the banks. The river had always been a special place

to him, a place of solace and peace. The water flowed slowly, without interruption of rock or debris; to the right and to the left as far as Edwin could see, there was no whitewater, just clear rippling, not even enough to obscure the view of the fish and river floor a few feet below.

As Eighty-Eight leapt in, Edwin sat on a rock and dangled his feet into the water. Fish darted away from both of them.

"This feels good, doesn't it?" he said. "This leaving, this starting a new life of sorts. What a relief to know that soon I'll be able to die."

He sat there for a time, watching his dog play in the water. The play soon turned to trying to catch a fish. She would climb the banks and wait quietly in the lengthening shadows for the fish to draw near, and then would leap at the most opportune moment. Eventually she caught one, and settled down on the opposite side of the river for dinner.

Edwin watched jealousy as the dog ate—he had never enjoyed going without food, no matter what spell it would lead to. Before long a small rat emerged from the grasses to Eighty-Eight's left, jumped onto a stone, and looked directly at Edwin. He stared back, furrowing his brow and frowning.

"What do you want, eh?" he asked.

"I've just come to see what an old friend is going to do with his magic," the rat said. Although Edwin had heard the voice many times, it still surprised him how human it sounded. Like a woman in her middle years, no longer as beautiful or innocent as she had once been.

"Friend! I am no more your friend than I am your father."

After a moment, the rat said, "Then I've come to see what the most powerful wizard for the last four hundred years is going to do with his-"

"It's none of your business. Go away."

"In a cosmic way it *is* my business. Other wizards will want to know. The people of the world will want to know. I can tell them."

"None of them deserve to know, do they?"

"Yes they do. Because you have given them so much, you have become a part of their lives. Whether you like it or not, you are obligated to them, now. They have become dependent on you."

"When they stopped thanking me for me my deeds and started expecting them, they stopped deserving anything I might have wanted to give them. You should understand that, Celeste. You are no longer the prodigy and the wonder you once were, even if you are more powerful than ever. Eh?"

She did not respond, but looked at Eighty-Eight, who had paused in her meal to listen to the conversation. When their eyes met, the dog licked her chops then growled softly. Edwin laughed loud enough that fish scattered away from where they had been swimming around his legs.

"Don't even think about it," Celeste said to the dog.

"And why not?" Edwin asked. "You'd make a tasty meal. And then the world would have a new prodigy to perform miracles for them. Why don't you pass your magic on, eh? You're so worried about mine. What about yours?"

"I am not quite ready-"

"And what about the other creatures you ate? The plants, the animals? Were they ready to die? I imagine more than one of them would have preferred to be human and chosen when to pass their magic on."

The dog had returned to chew on the remainder of the fish. The sun had set, and the sky grew dark.

"You have no reason to mistrust me."
"You already have too much magic. That is reason enough, isn't it?"
"Other wizards don't think like that."
He grunted.
"Giving your magic to me would be the right choice."
He grunted again.
"You cannot give it to Broady."
"I'm not *going* to give it to *Broady*."
"Who are you giving it to?"
"Go away."
"Who-"
"Get away from me."
The rat hesitated for a moment, then turned and slipped back into the foliage.

* * *

The next morning, Edwin began to climb the mountain. He stayed by the river whenever possible, following it upstream toward his destination. He moved more slowly than the day before. By noon he had not eaten anything for a full day and his strength had already started to wane. At nightfall he could drink, but for a day after that he would not have anything except his transference potion. Fortunately, clouds mitigated the sun's morning heat. They cleared by afternoon, but by then he had entered a canyon, where trees stood along the riverside in enough abundance that he walked in the shade most of the time.

Several hours after noon, Celeste appeared running alongside him, easily keeping up with his steady pace. Eighty-Eight had run ahead; Edwin had not seen her for some time.

"What you're going to do is dangerous."

"That depends on your perspective, doesn't it?"

"It's unpredictable, and when magic is not controlled, it is dangerous."

"Too much magic in one being is more dangerous, if you ask me. Who knows what that being might eventually do."

"Have I ever harmed a living thing that didn't deserve it?"

"Not yet. Not as far as I know, anyway."

"Why would I start?"

"I'm not giving my magic to you. You can give up."

"Then don't give it to anyone—to *anything*. Keep it. You can live comfortably if you choose."

"I have lived comfortably for long enough."

The rat laughed. "Comfortably? You call waging war for fifty straight years comfortable? You call taking thousands of lives and battling demons and having thousands of your own peoples' lives taken- you call that comfortable?"

"I can live comfortably after I have given up magic."

"In a dying home? That is not comfortable, either. You share a room with another old, dying wizard. A few times a day someone gives you food- not food you chose, but what they chose to make you. You sit around, unable to talk with others, communicate in any meaningful fashion. Maybe you play a game or two. But really you are there just waiting to die, hoping every morning that you wake up dead, sad when your roommate is the one that went and not you."

"Death will come, eventually. That is all that matters, isn't it?"

They walked along for a few minutes. Edwin stopped to sit on a dead, fallen tree in the shade. Celeste sat opposite him on a stone, observing his face. He tried not to look at her or to show any emotion or interest in anything, though he actually had started to look for his dog.

"You are resolved, then?" she asked.

He nodded.

"You'll cut out your tongue tonight?"

He nodded again.

"No going back after that, you know. If you change your mind once your tongue is out, you will live forever, unable to complete the transference potion at a future time."

"I know that, now don't I?"

"Broady is following you."

"Is he?" This came as a genuine surprise. "I hadn't expected that."

"He will try to steal the transference urine once you have put it in the cup."

"He won't get it."

"You will be helpless at that point. Perhaps I should stay with you to prevent him?"

"As you said, I will be helpless- convenient for you, eh?"

"I only take magic that is given to me."

"Well, I'm not giving you mine, so you can just stay away."

"You will be help-"

"Go away."

"I can help-"

"Get away from me."

The rat snapped her jaws closed, narrowed her eyes at Edwin, and then scampered off downstream.

A few moments later, Eight-Eight jogged up to Edwin from behind. She nuzzled her nose into her master's hand. Edwin did not notice for several seconds. He continued to stare at where the rat had sat. The dog gave a soft, "Woof!"

"Ah, you're back. Tired of walking alone? Well, let's move on."

* * *

The third time Celeste came to Edwin, the sun had barely set, and the sky was growing dim. Edwin lay with his head on a rock, his mouth open, the transference potion below his face, waiting for a tongue. He held a curved knife to his mouth, but had not yet cut. In his other hand he held a crumpled, dripping cloth. Eighty-Eight stood near him. She'd watched silently until Celeste's arrival, then stood and growled just loud enough to be heard. Her hackles rose.

"You're going to do it," the rat said.

Edwin whipped the knife out of his mouth and stretched his arm toward the rat; the blade stopped several inches from her face. She did not move. "Get away."

"This is your last chance."

"I'm well aware of that, aren't I?" His words were slightly slurred, matching the faint blur at the edges of his vision. A day and a half of fasting had not been easy for him. It would not get easier. "Go away!"

She did not move, but looked past the knife into Edwin's eyes.

"You cannot change my mind. Now leave."

She obeyed this time. Edwin watched until she had disappeared into the mountain's rocks and gathering darkness, and then brought the knife back to his lips. In two quick movements, he cut the skin holding his tongue to the bottom of his mouth, then twisted it and sliced his tongue. Red flesh and blood spilled out into the cup. Edwin rolled onto his arching back and half-screamed half-gurgled blood. He jammed the wet cloth into his mouth, and began to weep.

* * *

In the morning, Edwin drank the transference potion before starting off. He sat in a grove next to the river, on the trunk of a fallen tree. Dust danced in the sunlight as it angled down through the trees to play on the moss, shrubs, and flowers that covered the ground. The bloody blade still lay where he had dropped it the night before.

Once he raised the glass to his lips, he did not lower it until the drink was gone. It was quite an odd sensation to drink something without a tongue in his mouth. He'd never realized just how much the tongue helped liquid go down. Magic had already healed the wound, so it no longer hurt.

It tasted less foul than he had anticipated, perhaps because of his extended fast, but also because most of his tongue was in the cup. It smelled worse than it tasted, and looked worse than it smelled. Bugs, flower petals, herbs, and roots floated in the yellow and bloody liquid, making it hard to drink. The way his tongue and the other chunks slipped up against his lips bothered him far more than how his throat stung.

After finishing, he looked at Eighty-Eight, who stood before him, watching, never taking her eyes from her master's face. Edwin opened his mouth to speak, but what came out was nothing the dog could understand.

With a frown he shook his head and stood, put the lid back on the cup and the cup back into the pouch at his side, and then headed up the river. He used a crooked stick for balance, and squinted to focus his eyes. His stomach churned in protest at the disgusting drink, but he ignored it.

It wasn't far now, and wouldn't be long before he started urinating.

* * *

He tried to keep a look-out for Broady and Celeste, to watch his back and his sides. He would liked to have asked Eighty-Eight to do the same; having no tongue had already proven itself a rotten experience. He could only hope the dog had learned enough listening to his conversations with Celeste to know to watch out for them. But he couldn't remember if the dog had been around when Celeste had told him about Broady.

He saw neither of them, but most of the time he had to watch his footing as the terrain grew steeper and the plants and mosses gave way to rocks that covered most of the ground. Somehow, trees still grew out between the rocks, dense enough that he could use one for support, take a step, and use another one for support; he always had one hand on a tree, and another on his staff.

After no more than half a mile of climbing along the rocks, he stopped following the river. The mountain became too steep along the riverbank, practically making the river a miles-long waterfall, and he would have to climb to the riverhead a different way.

Not long later, he stopped to pee.

He got out the cup. The tongue sat in the bottom, still a little moist and bloody, partially covered by flower petals and herbs. He steadied himself against a tree and took aim. Eighty-Eight sat on a particularly large rock to watch, her tongue hanging down, eyes sharp.

It took a moment for the urine to come—such a long life would stretch out and weaken any bladder—but the second it started, he felt different. Weaker, more vulnerable. With each drop he could feel the magic leaving his body, draining the vitality and power out from him. Pain crept into his muscles and joints. Breaths became heavier and harder. The distant sound of the waterfall, the rustling of the trees and singing of birds were muffled, as if someone had put hands over his ears. His vision grew even more clouded, so that he could barely see his own feet.

But more than anything, he felt weary of life. Motivation and desire were foreign concepts, dreams from a distant time and another's experience, like something he'd once heard about as a child, in a story. He thought he'd wanted to die before, but now he understood the depth wanting to die could reach. What purpose was there in going on, in doing or thinking anything? Why had he lived so long? Why couldn't he just die right then and get it over with? Everything was pointless.

The suddenness of the despair overwhelmed him, and he began to sob. Soft whimpers rose from his throat. His body and hands shook. Some of the transference urine spilled onto his hands, reminding him of the inheritance he held. Through his tears he capped the glass and put it away. Unable to continue on, he collapsed against a tree. He raised his eyes toward the spots of sunlight and sky he could see through the branches, and released a wail that embodied the enormity of the weariness and weakness that had gripped him.

Eighty-Eight, who had hopped down from her rock, nuzzled her nose in his hand. He reached out and put his arms around the dog's body, pulled the animal close, and for a time cried into her tangled fur.

* * *

From the West, across the river, Broady heard what he first thought was a wolf howling. He halted, standing on a large rock, one hand on a tree. He held his breath, not wanting his panting to drown out another possible noise. He tilted his head toward the river, from where the howl had come from. Not a wolf's howl. There were no wolves in this area. As far as Broady knew, no animals large enough to make a noise like that lived in this rocky forest. It had to be something else.

When the noise did not repeat itself, Broady headed off in what he thought was the direction it had come from. He could only hope that it would lead him to Edwin; otherwise he would have to head straight up to the waterfall and hope Edwin hadn't done anything with the magic by the time he got there.

He stepped carefully across the river on slick rocks, and headed deeper into the forest. He climbed up and away from the river at a sharp angle- more up than away- keeping his eyes and ears alert. He climbed through the rest of the morning and into the early afternoon, but never again heard a noise or saw anything that might indicate Edwin had passed by there. He decided to go straight for the waterfall's head, and adjusted his path accordingly, taking a wider angle away from the river before heading directly up the rocky mountain.

Eventually, the mountain began to level off, and he knew he had neared the plateau. Though the trees prevented him from seeing, he knew that a mile or two further along the mountain rapidly grew steep again, leading to the highest peaks of the range, where the water

for the river originated. The rocks and trees continued to dominate the terrain in the plateau, and he headed back toward the river. He quickened his pace, worrying that Edwin had beaten him there and already dumped the magic urine. To his left the ground became steep, eventually reaching the point where no sane person would go up that way.

Although trees muffled the roaring of the river and waterfall, he knew he was getting close. The rushing grew louder with each step, eventually blocking out any noise of the forest or that Broady made. The River emerged suddenly between trees. The ground on the opposite side of the river went almost straight up just a few feet back from the riverbank, a cliff of jagged granite. At its base was an entrance to a cave, perhaps four feet tall and two feet wide. It looked like someone had chiseled out a misshapen, small door in the cliff's side. He scanned up and down the banks of the river, searching for Edwin, but saw no indication of the wizard having gone that way.

What if he had guessed wrong and Edwin was taking the magic somewhere else?

Broady scrambled down to the riverbank, tripping and scraping his shins several times in his rush. He made his way toward the edge of the waterfall, nearly falling into the rapid waters twice, and getting his right foot wet one of those times. A boulder hung out over the edge, and he stopped on it, lying down and peeking over the edge. In the late afternoon light, the rocks' white color caught the light just right, almost making it look like they glowed, and the mist that sprayed up from the waterfall glistened in the sun. At the bottom of the waterfall, the river sloped steeply away, gradually leveling out miles below. Whitewater was so prevalent it created the illusion that the waterfall did not end for several miles. Beginning at the base of the falls, a canvas of trees covered the mountain on both sides of the river. Much further down, where the mountain was less steep, the green gave way to browns, eventually disappearing into the barren valleys beyond.

Broady scanned the rocks and water far below. He saw no one. No Edwin. No Eighty-Eight. Gritting his teeth and swallowing hard, he tried to consider where Edwin might be, what he might be doing. Thinking wasn't easy with the roar of the water pounding in his chest and ears. Until now he had thought that Edwin would come to this very rock and dump the magic over the waterfall, let it spread its powers throughout the world, then jump after it. He could be wrong. He hoped that either he was, or that he had beaten Edwin there.

After a moment, he decided he was right- he really had no other option; if he was wrong, there was no chance he would ever get the magic. This was where Edwin was going. Broady had beaten him here, or-

He turned his head and looked back at the cave. Perhaps Edwin wasn't done getting the magic out. Perhaps he was resting in the cave.

Broady stood and headed back toward the cave, his heart pounding with excitement and fear. He could not find a place to cross the river until a few hundred feet up, where the rocks sat close enough together and in a row that he could use them as a bridge. He approached the cave's mouth more wary of being seen than being heard over the river's noise. The nearer he drew, the slower he walked, so that eventually each step took a few seconds. His heart beat violently. His hands shook as he placed them on the rocks at the entrance. He leaned against the wall. Licked his lips. Swallowed. He moved his head toward the entrance until his left eye was looking into the cave.

It took several moments, but once his eye had adjusted to the darkness he saw, perhaps twenty feet into the cave, a figure move in the dimness.

He clamped a hand over his mouth, stopping a shout of joy. He jerked his head back,

leaned closer against the wall.

What was he to do? How would he get the magic? Plans formulated and disappeared in rapid succession. It took only a moment for him to know that he would have to strike swiftly and quietly. But, should he go into the cave, or wait for Edwin to come out? Either way, all Edwin would have to do was tip the cup, and the magic would be gone.

* * *

Eighty-Eight watched silently as Edwin fumbled with the cup, mumbling tonguelessly to himself. Although she lay still in the cold dirt of the cave, she was ready to move at any moment- she kept her muscles tense, her ears open to the sound of anyone coming into the cave. The roaring of the river and waterfall, muted by the cave, still drowned out most noise. They had seen Broady outside, by the waterfall.

Edwin swayed slightly where he stood. He held the cup in two hands close to his stomach. His eyes darted through the room, looking for something he could do, somewhere he could put the magic.

Eighty-Eight understood the situation perfectly. His master was going to die and get rid of his magic. He did not want anyone to inherit the power. Broady was outside of the cave, presumably looking for Edwin and the magic, and would do anything to get what he felt rightfully belonged to him. And Celeste surely lurked nearby. The dog did not know what to do, but her animal instincts and human understanding told her to protect her master, to be loyal. It was the right thing to do. The noble thing. And she would do it. She was a dog, after all—a mutt, certainly, but nonetheless one of the noblest of creatures.

"Ah!" Edwin said, one of the few intelligible words he could say. The intensity in his voice and his sudden movement toward the cave wall startled Eighty-Eight, and made her jerk to a half-standing position. With shaking hands, he took the lid from the jar and knelt. Near the dirt floor, a vertical crack in the wall only a few inches thick created something of a basin inside the wall. The crevice was small enough that Eighty-Eight would not have been able to put her nose into it. A rat could fit its head in, but not its body. Many such cracks marred the wall of the cave on all sides.

Edwin brought the jar to the lip of the crack. It clanked against the rock as he tried to steady his hand, and then tipped the jar. In the dim light, Eighty-Eight watched him pour the urine into the basin. A little dribbled down the rock, shiny and glistening. But most of the urine made it into the crack, creating a small pool inside the wall.

"Eh, eh," Edwin said. Still on his knees, he turned to her and beckoned by patting his leg.

She obeyed, and he scratched her scalp. She focused her eyes on his, and tried her best to make sure he knew that she understood and would help.

He held her head in his hands, so close to his face that she had no choice but to look into his eyes. Sunken and hollow, tired, nervous. So many emotions she saw in his eyes. But no fear. He did not fear death. She licked his cheek, and he embraced her, saying something that she thought should have been, "Good girl."

He stood and she turned toward the narrow, low entrance, about twenty feet away, and then looked back at him, waiting for the word to go. Her heart pounded.

As Edwin looked at the mouth of the cave, he licked his lips, gripped the jar more tightly, and swallowed. He cleared his throat quietly, then in a whisper, he said, "O a e, a." He slapped her back softly. "O!"

She leapt forward, toward light, and in a few bounds was out of the cave, squinting her eyes in the brightness.

She had not counted on two things. First was the riverbank, spotted with rocks, being so near- maybe six feet from the cave mouth. Second was how close to the entrance Broady was.

He jumped back in surprise as she passed him. She dug her paws into the ground at the river's edge to stop and turn. With a roar she leapt at him. He cried out in fear and held his arms before him even as he lashed with his foot. The kick glanced off her side. Her nails dug into his forearm. He screamed. She tasted blood and flesh, and whipped her head around and backwards, pulling him down to the ground.

But too late she realized that she had pulled to the wrong side, toward the cave instead of away, because at that moment Edwin stumbled out of the cave toward the river, holding one arm to his eyes against the brightness and holding the jar close to him with the other. Broady reached out with this spare arm, and caught the wizard's leg.

Edwin fell, his head cracking against a sharp rock with a spray of blood. The jar flew from his arm toward the river. Eighty-Eight dove at Broady's neck. Her muzzle struck his chest because the old man was too fast in moving toward the hurtling jar. It turned top over bottom as it splashed in the rapid water. She made one last attempt to stop him as he dove in after, but her teeth clamped shut over air instead of his leg or foot.

She ran along the bank next to him, barking and growling, watching the jar bobbing, moving downstream toward the waterfall. Broady swam to catch up, his arms and legs flailing in wild panic. He reached the jar about twenty feet from the falls. While trying to stay afloat he jerked the lid open and put it to his lips. His eyes widened in horror and he wailed as the water carried him over the edge. Eighty-Eight watched for only a moment as Broady clutched the jar and plummeted into the mist below.

She turned and ran back to her master. He lay on his side, a rock poking into his head and blood running down onto it. His eyes stared vacantly and his mouth hung slightly open. Although she knew that he had gone, and that it was what he had wanted, she nuzzled his face once or twice, then raised her head to the air and howled.

As her howl faded, she remembered that the business was not done. Celeste might still be around. Knowing she could probably do very little to stop the rat from getting the magic, she turned and went back into the cave. There, in the dimness, at the base of the wall, he could see Celeste's fat body. The rat's head was in the crack. The rodent was making odd, pleasure-filled noises. The fur of her body quivered as her muscles seemed to spasm.

Without even thinking, Eighty-Eight leapt forward. Her teeth closed around the rat's body, pierced her fur, skin, muscles, and her inner organs. She ripped the rat out of the crevice and threw her against the wall. The rat's body convulsed as it thudded against the floor, and Eighty-Eight dove on it with her paws and her jaws. She ripped flesh away.

And something happened that she had not considered: magic flowed into her. Like the time she had eaten the carrot grown in magic soil, a tingling started at her lips, bolted down her neck and into her body and legs. She quivered in pleasure as she absorbed the power.

When she had first attacked the rat, it had been out of rage and sadness. But as she began to eat the rat in earnest, her motive changed- she wanted the pleasure of the magic.

It took her hours to eat the rat, so great was the power. A single bite would render her unable to move for minutes at a time, as the magic became part of her. She could feel herself changing, becoming a different creature. She came to understand that the pleasure she felt was a polar opposite to the agony her master had endured while getting rid of his magic.

When the eating was done, and the tiny bones cracked open and sucked dry, she turned to the place Edwin had left his urine. Most of it remained- the rat had not consumed much of it. So much power. Just waiting.

She left the cave. Edwin lay there, pale and silent in the moonlight, still staring. She lay next to him, close. His body felt cold. She knew that with her new power she could get the rest of his magic, now. It would, perhaps, double her strength. But is that what he would want? Did she need, or even desire that much magic?

Until morning she lay next to him, thinking and weighing. As the first warm rays of the sun hit her back, she stood, her decision made.

The End

Stephen Nelson has been writing Fantasy since he was 15. That hobby led him to pursue a BA in English from the University of Utah, where he also obtained a BA in Mass Communication and an MBA. He lives in Utah with his wife and two children (with a third on the way).

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